

Outbreak Company: Volume 2

Ichiro Sakaki

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Illustration Yuugen

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THE POWER OF MOE

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Eldant Maid Girl—Myusel Fourant

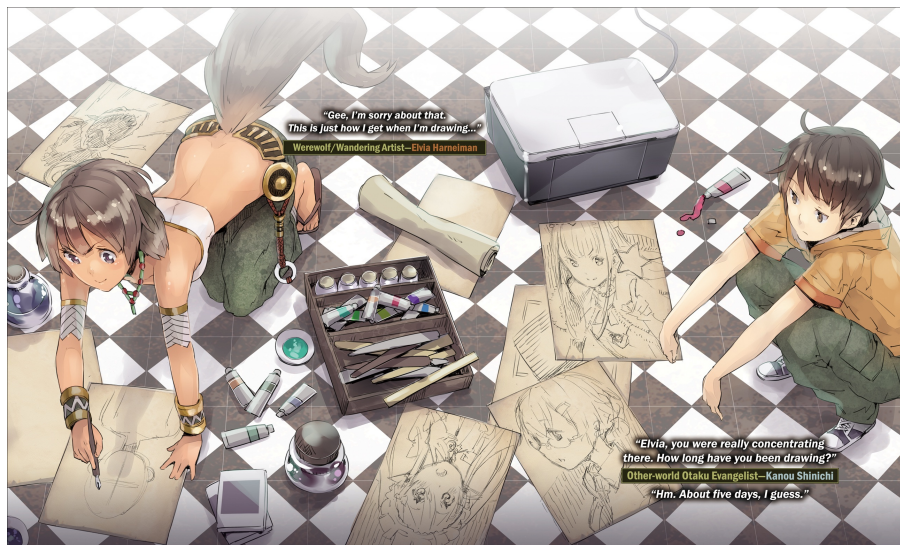
Private First Class, Japan Self-Defense Force—Kagayama Minor
“You two were looking awfully friendly.”

Young MP, Knight of the Eldant, and also Warrior: Kariya no Genshou

Exalted Eldant Princess—Petra aka an Eldant III

Holy Eldant Empress—Petra aka an Eldant III
“Otaku culture is quite a good thing.
It broadens one's views and
enlarges one's world!”





"Gee, I'm sorry about that.
This is just how I get when I'm drawing..."

Werewolf/Wandering Artist—Elvia Harselman

"Elvia, you were really concentrating
there. How long have you been drawing?"

Other-world Otaku Evangelist—Kanou Shinichi

"Hm. About five days, I guess."

Chapter One: Good Morning, Alternate World!

My little sister looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes.

“Can I... sleep with you?”

For a second, my mind went completely blank. Her moist eyes were at once shy and inviting. Her hesitation showed in the trembling of her pale red lips and white cheeks.

Only the most pure, the most unblemished of young women could have gotten away with this—it was basically their Secret Ultimate Technique. An instant kill. No man could resist it. No man would want to. I knew that, and yet half-reflexively, I tried to push back.

“D—”

Don't be an idiot. What are you talking about?

But I couldn't even bring myself to say the words. My tongue, as if trapped by magic, refused to move.

And then the little girl, clutching her pillow, went on, “I can't sleep... Can't I please stay in your bed...?”

It was perfect. What else would a little sister carry when she came to her big brother's room in the middle of the night? I simply couldn't see any way out. Instead I just stood there, goggling.

Dear sister, when did you get so... mature...?

“Big Brother...” Her voice was pitiful and pleading. My resolve to turn her down instantly evaporated. She sprang those two words like a trap that left me with no escape.

Big Brother, she'd said! Of course, she could have thrown in a nice curveball, called me “Elder Brother” or even just “Bro” or something. But sometimes the tried and true is best. I saw her killer technique coming from a mile away, and I still couldn't defend against it. It was all I could do just to roll over so my back was to her and face the wall.

“Eh heh heh.” She seemed to take my silence for acceptance. With my back turned, I couldn't see what my little sister was doing. But I could intuit that she was laughing to cover her embarrassment and then climbing into my bed.

“Big Brother...” Her whisper seemed to brush against my back.

Dammit. I could see it now—see the trap I had fallen into.

I knew how these scenarios played out. Sure, you get into bed together, but you don't go right to being in each other's arms. Maybe there's an embrace, but it's from behind. You're in a narrow bed

together, so you wrap your arms around the other person, feel their body heat. And then, when the time is right, they turn over. You realize you're looking at each other from a distance so close you can feel each other's breath...! It seems coincidental, yet inevitable. That's what's important. The touch of awkwardness is the ultimate testament to the girl's purity. By turning my back to her... I had only played right into her hands!

I didn't say anything. She didn't say anything. The silence hovered between us. But I already knew how this was going to go. After a moment's hesitation, she would say something reluctant yet resolute, like, "This really isn't right, is it?" or, "But Big Brother, I really..." All followed by her big confession! That was the way it was supposed to go—it was practically tradition. I waited for the moment when I would "accidentally" find myself face-to-face with her. Waiting was all I could do.

And then...

"Um... Say... Big Brother?"

"Yeah, what?" I tried to sound nonchalant. My heart had decided to pound as hard as it could. The sound of blood rushing around my body was deafening in my ears. Wasn't there some way I could bring my pulse down? And then she said it.

"B-Big Brother, could... could I..."

"What? Could you what?" My voice was shaking. I was boiling with heat (not that I knew what that meant).

"Um..."

I could feel her breath against my earlobe. She was so close, and her breath was so soft. Ahh...

And then she said...

"Could I tie you up?"

.....saywhat?

I instinctively looked at her, and my sanity returned.

"Wait a second," I groaned, "who are you?!"

It's true, I had a little sister. She was two years younger than me, sassy as hell, and she thought about as much of her older brother as a cowboy does of the snake in his boot.

With parents like ours—our father a light-novel author and our mother a former writer-designer-programmer for ero games—you might expect that us kids would be 110% brainwashed otaku. But there's another possibility, which is that as a form of rebellion, a kid might totally refuse any and all things geeky.

In our house, I was the brainwashed one while my sister was the rebel. She didn't much get along with any other member of the family,

especially not me. Unlike our parents, whom she had to rely upon financially and legally for the time being, there was no disadvantage to her if she ticked me off. I hated how calculating she was about it. She didn't want to get on the wrong side of Mom and Dad with her rebellious behavior, so she let it all out on me.

Anyway, forget all that. The girl in front of me was definitely not my little sister.

For starters, my little sister didn't have silver hair. And her eyes weren't green. In fact, this girl obviously wasn't even Japanese. *Jeez, self! Couldn't you have noticed that a little sooner?!*

But, having been caught up in the utterly textbook sleeping-with-little-sister event, I hadn't even taken that first, simple mental step.

You're stupid beyond belief, Kanou Shinichi! I've disappointed even myself this time! But forget about that, we've got bigger problems!

"Big Brother, how could you?"

Despite my self-proclaimed little sister's wounded words, she was wearing a smirk. For some reason, her face appeared to be illuminated from below. It wasn't quite clear where the light was coming from, but thanks to it I could see her sharp yet lovely features. And I could see she looked about as friendly as a Demon King.

"How could you forget your dear little sister?"

Suddenly the girl calling herself my little sister was standing proud on top of the bed, holding something in each hand—Ropes? Whips? I couldn't tell—and looking down at me eagerly. Her features were well-balanced, but a youthful pudginess remained here and there—she was less pretty than cute.

So, let's summarize. A girl calling herself my little sister was standing above me with some kind of S&M accessory in each hand. She was definitely no little sister of mine.

What kind of ero game was this?! Was she some crazy yandere type? Was this a one-way ticket to a bad ending? What kind of terrible fate would I bring down on myself if I didn't consider my choices very, very carefully?

All this was going through one corner of my mind, but the rest of me reflexively shouted:

"Forget?! Forget what?! I don't have any little sister like you!"

"Aw, that hurts," Self-Proclaimed Little Sister said, but all the same she advanced on me, tugging at her ropes in a way that produced a very distinct cracking sound.

For what reason does she appear so practiced in these mannerisms? And... am I so scared that my internal monologue is using formal vocabulary?

"So, what am I to you, Big Brother?"

"I can't answer that! No, wait— Stop!"

“Well, fine,” she said, puffing out her cheeks. Okay, that was a little cute.

No, stop! This is no time to be getting all moe!

“From this day forward, you can consider us your queen.”

“W-Wait, whaaaaat?!”

How the heck did that work? For that matter, why was she suddenly talking so differently?

“We are automatically promoting you from Big Brother to Pig.”

“H—How is that a promotion? No, hold on! Those ropes, they—they chafe!”

“You are one noisy pig. Don’t you know pigs say *bonk bonk*?”

“No, they don’t! They say *oink oink*!”

“But *bonk bonk* is such a good sound. It lets everyone know you’re a pig, including you.”

“Don’t try to twist reality just for human convenience! You should be kind to the earth! And to me!”



“Shut up already, you obnoxious pig!”

What the heck is going on here?

Before I knew it, I was tied up and rolling around on the bed. She was so quick. Impossibly quick. For that matter, why hadn't I been able to resist?

“You're only fit to be made into cup ramen, but we haven't killed you yet. You can show your gratitude by kissing our foot as we awaken you with it!”

With that, Self-Proclaimed Little Sister—who I guess was now my silver-haired queen—raised her foot. There was a huge rumbling sound from somewhere, and she brought her foot down at me...

...and I woke up screaming, “BOOOOOOOOOOONK!”

Let's be clear. I don't mean *woke up* as some weird fetish euphemism. I just mean I was sleeping, and then I wasn't.

“Oh... Oh, God...” I sat up in bed, breathing hard. That had been a terrible dream in any number of ways.

For starters, a little sister who comes into her big brother's bedroom saying, “I can't sleep. Can I get in bed with you?” is a creature that only exists in fiction. She isn't physically possible, just the product of fevered adolescent fantasy. And we humans are buffeted back and forth between such phantasms and reality, and in the process, we grow up... (I'm too shaken to know what that means.)

“Um...”

“Anyway, Shizuki never called me ‘Big Brother.’ Come to think of it... What did she call me? Huh? It's almost like we went three years without having a real conversation...”

“Um, Master?”

“N-Not that it would bother me not to have talked to her for three years! Er... Ugh, no, that's just tsundere-ish self-deception. But seriously, I can remember it like it was yesterday—the times when Shizuki would follow me around, or cry when I had to go off to elementary school... Wait a second, I know it wasn't yesterday, but how long ago *was* that?”

“Master, um... Breakfast is ready...”

“Yeah... We haven't had breakfast together in so long...”

It was only after this whisper had escaped me that I finally registered that I wasn't alone in my room.

“Master...?”

At last, I saw the maid standing there. She was an absolute beauty, but her flaxen hair and indigo eyes pretty much screamed, *not Japanese*. Not least because when a Japanese girl puts on a maid

outfit, it's hard to avoid the impression she's just doing cosplay, but this girl... It looked so right on her. The design of her dress was a little different from what you might call a true Victorian-era maid outfit—it left her pale shoulders exposed, and the hem of her skirt was a little short, coming to just above her knees. But it was a testament to her maid-likeness that it still didn't look even a little bit silly on her.

Her outfit alone made her beautiful enough, but it was her confused, slightly lost expression that put the adorable icing on the cake.

Her name was Myusel Fourant, and she was my maid.

A shut-in otaku with a personal maid-san? It's enough to make you want to know what kind of ridiculous ero game I was in. I've got to say, for a long time I was sure it was a dream, too. I was pinching myself every morning when I got up.

Myusel seemed startled to see me shaken; she treated me as gently as a convalescent. But actually, it had been nearly four months since she had been assigned to look after me. We were pretty used to each other by now.

Incidentally...

The room I woke up in was super fancy, very different from the bedroom in my dream. Furnishings were minimal, just some lamps, but a huge, canopied bed sat in the middle of the room, a proud waste of space. There were, of course, no desks or bookshelves. This room was for sleeping and sleeping only—hence why the bed was the protagonist of the interior decor. But you mustn't think this was merely a display of excess. Oh, no! The mansion I was in had so many rooms that if I didn't specialize them like this, I would never have been able to use them all up.

Anyway, never mind.

"Um... Myusel?"

"Yes, Master?"

"How much did you hear...?"

"Um," she murmured, tilting her head like a little bird. *Gaaah! Every little gesture she makes is just so cute!* "From about the part where you said 'Who are you?!' I guess."

"Yikes! I said that out loud?" I was afraid my sleep talk had given away the contents of my nightmare.

"So I answered, 'It's Myusel,' but..."

"It didn't occur to you that I was talking in my sleep?"

"Oh. Was that all it was?" Myusel said, a relieved look on her face.

Wait a second—does she think I don't know her name or who she is yet?!

"Myusel, would I ever ask you who you are? We've lived in the

same house for how many months now? Even *my* memory isn't that bad."

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant," Myusel said, shaking her head vigorously. Her long hair bobbed from side to side in time with the motion. When we had first met, her hair had been tied in twintails on either side of her head, but now she was wearing ponytails instead, leaving her pointy ears completely exposed.



Myusel, to put it bluntly, was not human. She had mixed blood, and her ears were the proof. Myusel had something of an inferiority complex about her heritage, and usually didn't like people to see the reminders that were stuck perpetually to her head. She had lived her whole life until very recently keeping them hidden, in fact. The environment she'd been living in had made it necessary.

But the environment she'd been living in hadn't been my house. Once she realized that I wasn't going to hold her birth against her, she frequently started wearing ponytails around the mansion. Unlike twintails, ponytails generally keep the hair from covering the face when you look down, so they make it easier to do things like cooking and laundry. Setting aside the practical benefits, though, the ponytails were also a sign of how much she had relaxed around me and the others who lived in this house. The thought gave me a little burst of pride.

"You said I should be kind to the earth, and kind to you, so I wasn't sure how best to call out to you..."

"Um, that was just sleep-talk, too."

As I spoke, I climbed out of bed. As I said, it was an elegant canopied thing, the sort of bed you might normally picture a princess sleeping in. It was practically a symbol for "noble" or "rich guy." Sleeping on it was nothing like trying to get a night's rest on the steel-frame bed you bought for 19,800 yen at the store. If I could have sold just this one piece of furniture and exchanged the proceeds for Japanese yen—well, the thought of how rich I would have been was practically enough to keep me awake at night.

"Er, anyway. You were saying something about breakfast?"

"Yes, sir. It's ready."

"Okay. I'll be right there."

"Certainly," Myusel said with a deep bow. She did an about-face and left my room.

The first time we had met, Myusel had tried to help me change my clothes. It was only natural to her; she saw it as part of her job. But I insisted that helping me get my clothes on in the morning was not on her list of duties, and now she was careful to leave the room whenever she sensed I was going to change.

Yes, sometimes I had to put on outfits that were hard to get into all by myself, and then I would let Myusel help me. But first thing in the morning... Like any young man, the lower half of my body started the day off very, uh, energetically, and I didn't necessarily want her to see that.

I let out a breath as I opened the curtain. The bright light of the early sun poured into the room like an avalanche.

Over the past four months, I had grown accustomed to what I now saw outside the window. There was a verdant forest and an impossibly clear sky. The little shapes that flew overhead weren't birds, but small wyverns, purpose-bred and trained as mounts for knights.

In case you hadn't guessed, this wasn't modern Japan. I was in one of those "other worlds" that normally only existed in anime, manga, and light novels. Around here, we called it the Holy Eldant Empire.



AD 201X: the Japanese government makes a discovery that can safely be called unprecedented in human history. To be precise, it wasn't the government that made the discovery so much as one of the volunteer patrols and local police groups working their way through Aokigahara, the forest at the foot of Mount Fuji. But that doesn't really matter, because this was the find of the century.

They discovered a hyperspace tunnel, a portal to another world. Right there in the middle of the "Sea of Trees."

How long had it been there? And why? How exactly did it work? We still didn't know the answers to any of those questions. The government, aware of what a huge deal this discovery would be if it were made public, decided to keep it strictly under wraps. That meant there was no real chance to do large-scale research on the hyperspace portal. Only a few people, sworn to utmost secrecy, were involved in figuring out what exactly was going on.

On the other side of the hyperspace portal was a human nation with a whole lot of space, not to mention its own culture. When the government found that out, it established a front organization called the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau and opened relations. But things didn't go exactly as planned.

Since the Holy Eldant Empire had magic, telepathic communication was established without too much trouble. The problems started after that. We were dealing with an imperial system, essentially an absolute dictatorship. The intellectual and cultural level around here was effectively medieval. Liberty? Equality? Fellowship? What are those? Are they tasty? The gulf between these people and modern Japanese sensibilities was so wide that it seemed unlikely we were going to get along.

The need for secrecy made it hard to recruit new personnel. Plus, it so happened that our country was busy with a transfer of power of its own. The Japanese government basically got impatient with the slow progress in relations with the Eldant Empire and started to get bolder in its tactics.

As a result, the government decided to give the relationship a little push by focusing on the traditional Japanese export that the Eldant people had seemed to have the best reaction to: otaku stuff, like anime and manga.

The two governments agreed to co-sponsor Amutech, the first “general entertainment company” in this alternate world. Tokyo decided to leave running the place to someone who actually knew something about otaku culture. Amutech conducted interviews in the otaku mecca of Akihabara, with the intention of kidnapping some qualified nerd and making them the company’s general manager.

Enter: me.

That’s right. The otaku they found, abducted, and dragged bodily to this alternate plane of existence was yours truly, Kanou Shinichi.

I mean, geez...



I took the stairs from my bedroom on the second floor down toward the dining area on the first. Sunlight was slathered across the landing through the big picture window, casting everything in the mansion in a sort of high relief. It was pleasantly warm in the sun, and all the parts of the house that were in shadow were just a bit cool. Unlike modern Japan’s well-insulated houses, in brick buildings like this one the same room might be warm in one place and cold in another.

I hummed tunelessly as I walked along. “Wonder what I’m gonna get today? ♪”

Myusel was an excellent cook. I was the sort of person who firmly believed that breakfast was rice or it was nothing, but over the course of my time in Eldant, I had found the food she made so delicious that I had even started to consider betraying my own principles. Sometimes she would come up with things that my modern Japanese palate found surprising—such as boiled eggs covered in honey—but if I could let go of my prejudices long enough to try them, I often discovered they were delicious.

Not to mention, Myusel seemed to be taking close note of my reactions and changing the way she cooked to suit my tastes, so the food had only gotten better and better. If I paid enough attention as I ate, I could tell that even a repeat dish had been changed in subtle ways so that I would like it better.

That explains why I was so happy as I waltzed on over to the dining area. It also explains why—

Bloing.

— I failed to look where I was going and stepped right on the thing.

Whatever I had stepped on, it definitely didn't have the same consistency as the floor. I looked down at my feet to find something like a very long feeler stretched out across the hallway. It must have been more than two meters long, maybe even three, from end to end.

It seemed like... kind of a lump, just hanging out there. Whatever the feeler was attached to, it was hidden in the shadows, so I couldn't get a good look at it. But its head was obviously too big to be human; it looked like it could probably open its mouth wide enough to swallow a small child.

I reflexively went stiff and pulled my foot back. "A m-m-m-monster!" But then I made a mystified sound. I thought I remembered something like this happening before.

The weird thing on the floor didn't move. I took about three steps back, just for safety, and calmed my pounding heart. Then I took a fresh look at the "feeler."

"Brooke?!"

"Ahh... Mas...ter...?"

The huge, reptilian head raised itself with a great effort. Standing there was the mansion's manservant, Brooke Darwin.

Like Myusel, he was one of the servants who had been brought to work at this mansion when the Holy Eldant Empire lent it to Amutech.

"Good... mornin' t' you," he said quietly. He sounded out of it—or, well, I guess he was just tired.

Brooke was a lizardman. Normally, lizardmen walk on two legs, but their skin is covered in blue scales, they have long, narrow faces, and they lack eyelids. And then there's the tails that snake from their waists, more like something you'd find on a dinosaur than a lizard.

Admittedly, since Brooke was just lounging around on the floor, his tail didn't look very threatening, but I would say that made it at least 30% weirder.

"What's going on, sir...?"

"That's my line!" I put a hand to my chest, where my heart was still going a little fast. I knew now that he was neither hostile nor a monster, but running into a gigantic reptile in a dim hallway was still kind of unsettling.

In any event, it was his tail I had stepped on.

"What are you doing, sleeping on the floor?" I asked. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Ahh... Just fine..." Brooke got slowly to his feet, sounding oddly apologetic. "Please remember, I am... a reptile..."

"I'm not forgetting, believe me."

“At night, and in the morning... my body temperature drops... and I just get so sleepy...”

“Oh, is that all?” Now that I thought about it, I realized that I often didn’t see much of Brooke in the morning.

For the most part, Brooke took care of the external appearance of the house, looking after the garden and such, so he wasn’t indoors much. That left me unsure about his daily routine—how exactly he went about life between getting up and going to bed. There had been plenty on my plate the last four months, and I hadn’t really had time to wonder about it...

“You see, sir...? At night, I’ll... make a fire behind the house and warm myself for a few hours... But sometimes... it’s not enough... The floor by the window warms up in the sunlight nice and early... so sometimes I just find myself... lying here...”

He was basically trying to absorb as much sun as he could. Lizardmen might have evolved to walk on two legs, but apparently they couldn’t escape their fate as cold-blooded animals.

“I get it. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to step on your tail.”

“Aww, ’tis nothin’... Please, step on it all you like...” He sounded like he might go back to sleep at any moment.

“No, no, no! You know I’m not like that!”

Brooke could be intimidating at first glance, but he was actually very easygoing, and a hard worker. But he also considered it to be part of the job description of a demi-human servant to accept random acts of physical abuse from their master—usually a noble or someone similarly wealthy. So he didn’t fight back if he was hit. Granted, as a reptile, he may not have felt pain as acutely as some of us more fragile animals.

“Wait a second... Brooke, are you here because you were on your way to the dining hall?”

If all he wanted was to collect heat, it seemed like it would’ve been more effective to lie somewhere outdoors. He was probably in the shadows now because the sun had moved, causing the angle of the light to change. I suspected he had been here like this for at least three hours.

“...Hmm... Now that you mention it, I suppose I was,” he said.

Normally, a master and his servants would never eat at the same table together. That was considered obvious by people like Brooke and Myusel. Lizardmen, in particular, were seen as even lower than other demi-humans, and also preferred slightly different food, so they often ate at a different place and time from everyone else.

Then there was me. As general manager of Amutech, I ranked on par with a human noble in the Holy Eldant Empire. That meant that there was a pretty serious difference in social status between me and

my maid and manservant.

For all those reasons, Brooke had simply assumed that he would take his meals alone. I, however, suggested that he join us for breakfast. We all lived in the same house together, after all, and it seemed both inefficient and kind of lonely for everyone to eat separately. I understood that being apart for meals was considered right and proper in this world. But I was born in Japan on the cusp of the twenty-first century. Plus, my parents were a light-novel author and a former ero game writer-designer, making me 110% otaku, *plus* I was a former shut-in and NEET. I really couldn't have cared less about differences in social status or class or whatever—in fact, I was actively against them. And as such, I wanted to make sure I spent time with Myusel and Brooke as much as possible.

Then again, looking at Brooke as he lay indolently on the ground, I realized maybe breakfast was a bit of a reach for him. The mornings would only be getting colder, making it all the more difficult for him to get around. Maybe we could have breakfast a little later in the day or something. I'd have to think about it.

“Okay, Brooke, come on. Get up.”

“Yessir...” He stood, swaying slightly. He really did look extremely tired, and I felt a little bit bad for him... But at the same time, it was dangerous to have him just splayed out in a random hallway. I didn't want him to get hurt being stepped on, or anyone else to get hurt stepping on him.

I took his hand, mindful of his claws, and began to lead him toward the dining room.

“Good morning,” I said as I came into the dining area.

Although we were technically renting this house—which was also the home base and main office of General Entertainment Purveyor Amutech—from the Holy Eldant Empire, for practical purposes I was the owner. I would have been within my rights to speak a little less politely. If I had come in and just said “Hey, all,” nobody would have complained. But when the person you're talking to has a couple years on you, that makes it harder to be too casual.

“Good morning, Shinichi-kun.” The girl at the table gave me an easy smile. She had well-balanced features, but I'm not sure I would have called her beautiful so much as very cute. She was kind of baby-faced. And there was something very approachable about her, like she had forgotten to keep aging ever since she reached her teens. One glance at the two mountains on her chest, though, made it obvious she was no little girl.

In fact, she was older than me. Despite her appearance, she was a member of the most powerful military organization in Japan—the Japan Self-Defense Force, or JSDF. She was what you would call a

WAC, a female soldier. And she was on active duty, a fact you could tell from the suitcase that was constantly at her feet. It contained a 9mm automatic pistol.

This was Koganuma Minori-san, and she was the bodyguard the Japanese government had assigned to me.

“G’... G’mornin’...” Brooke drowsily greeted Minori-san and Myusel, the latter of whom came rushing over, probably aware of what was affecting Brooke. I was grateful; I couldn’t hold the lizardman up on my own much longer.

“Are you all right, Master?” Myusel asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I grunted, “but it would be great if you could help me out here.”

“Right!”

The two of us managed to get Brooke to a chair, then we took our own seats. Myusel had already set breakfast out on the oval table. There was bread piled in a basket in the middle, and a plate of food was waiting for each of us. On Brooke’s plate, and his alone, was raw meat with some salt and pepper on it, along with some unpeeled fruit. This was not, obviously, because Myusel didn’t like Brooke. Nor was it poor cooking on her part. This was just the way the lizardman liked his food.

“Bon appétit!” I said, clapping my hands together in the Japanese style. Minori-san did the same, then Myusel and Brooke copied us—and then we started to eat.

Our fellowship consisted of:

The master of the house (male, human).

His bodyguard (female, human).

The maid (female, half-elf).

And the manservant (male, lizardman).

To have all of us sitting and eating at one table together made our breakfast perhaps the most unique in the entire Eldant Empire. More than a few people might have raised an eyebrow to see us, but I enjoyed lively meals. During my shut-in days I had eaten each and every meal alone, which gave me a special appreciation for this company.

What’s more, we’re relatively unguarded when we eat, much like when we sleep. It’s easier to relax. Myusel ate carefully, tasting every bite, while Minori-san couldn’t shovel the food in fast enough. Brooke was sleepily eating his fruit. The sight of them was oddly endearing.

“By the way, Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, grabbing some bread from the basket. It was her fourth piece. She really knew how to eat. Yet she didn’t show any sign of gaining weight. Where did it all go? Were her giant boobs the result of her copious consumption?

Anyways. She went on: “What’s your plan for today? Are we

sticking to the schedule?”

“Oh... uh, yeah. No change,” I said, pulling my smartphone out of my pocket and checking the schedule.

Obviously, there were no cell phone towers around here, so I wasn’t getting any service as such. But the JSDF had set up a series of medium-range antennas at the house and around the castle town so that me, Minori-san and the other JSDF people, and the handful of other Japanese who had come here could keep in touch.

On that note, even wired communication with Japan had been static-y and inconsistent at first, but the military and the government had tried this and that, and now claimed they would soon be able to get us phone lines and internet.

That would certainly open up my options. Online games would be available, image collections, sprawling online forums. Granted, there might be some restrictions in the name of secrecy...

“We’ll pay our usual visit to Her Majesty at the castle,” I said, running my finger along the screen. “Then head over to the school for class.”

“Got it,” Minori-san said, nodding as she checked her own cell phone. By sheer luck, she and I happened to have the same model. It was a “G”-series “tough phone” that claimed to have military-grade durability. In Minori-san’s case, maybe that made sense. I’d bought mine just to amuse myself.

“Oh, Myusel,” I said, turning to the maid next to me. “Her Majesty said you should come, too. She wants you to get a checkup.”



“Oh, okay.” Myusel nodded.

Almost three months before, Myusel had been badly wounded in a particular series of events—she had been stabbed in the stomach protecting the empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. She had been rushed to the royal hospital for treatment and had recovered, but since her release, she continued to go back once a month or so to make sure she was still doing all right.

“Okay,” Minori-san said. “We all know what we have to do today, then.”



We arrived at the imperial castle of the Eldant Empire. It was the single biggest building I had ever seen in my life. Not the tallest, mind you. There were plenty of buildings in Japan that reached higher in the sky. But the presence of this place, the scale—no place I knew gave more of an impression of the soundtrack going *ba-buum!* when you saw it.

I don't think it was just the sheer size, both inside and outside, that contributed to this impression. It was the way the colors and shape of it practically cried out, *An important person lives here!* Minori-san told me this used to be a mountain and that the castle was fashioned from it using magic. That might have explained why it seemed to be all one big, single piece.

Nonetheless, after coming here regularly for four months, I was slowly getting used to it. The armored guards, the opulently appointed hallways—they didn't exactly feel like my own home, but maybe like the home of a friend. Which, actually, this was.

By which I mean...

“Ahem.” There was a cough.

I stood in front of the thick oak door. The royal guards on either side bowed to me.

“Kanou Shinichi, general manager of Amutech, and his party including Koganuma Minori and Myusel Fourant, hereby present themselves to offer their morning greetings to Her Majesty and make their customary report. We humbly request to be allowed entrance.”

I used to stumble my way through this ritual, but now I pretty much had it down.

In case you're wondering, the words we were speaking to each other were being helpfully interpreted by magic rings that we each wore, which allowed us to communicate telepathically. I had gone through this routine so many times, though, that I could practically have given my greeting in the Eldant language.

The two guards announced our arrival in unison. “Kanou Shinichi-sama, Koganuma Minori-sama, and their company have arrived!”

Minori-san, who was there as my bodyguard, and I returned the soldiers’ bow. They each pulled on huge metal rings, opening the door.

For what it’s worth, Minori-san was obviously an outworlder, and therefore outside the local system of ranks and classes; that was why she was treated with the respect due a knight. Myusel, who stood on my other side, however, was just a commoner, and the knights didn’t bother bowing to her.

It was moments like this that made me acutely aware of how stratified society in the Holy Eldant Empire was. To Myusel, it was just par for the course, and she showed no reaction to being ignored.

But let’s forget about that for now.

“Thank you,” I said, bowing to the guards and stepping onto the room’s red carpet.

There were several audience halls in the Eldant castle. For example, there was one for when all the ministers and ambassadors and dignitaries were present, and another for when Her Majesty was seeing just a few people for a report or a personal greeting. This meant the audience chambers came in different sizes, with the size corresponding to the use.

We were in the smaller, more private one, of course. But the room was still large enough to comfortably house a tennis court. And at the far end...

“It is good to see you, Shinichi. Myusel and Minori, as well.” Lounging on the throne was Her Imperial Majesty herself, the owner of this whole giant castle.

“Your Majesty, how good to see you in fine spirits,” I said with a bow. Minori-san, to my left, and Myusel, to my right, offered their respects, too.

“Hmph. We see even you’ve managed to learn a thing or two about etiquette,” the ruler said with a smile. No matter how you sliced it, she looked awfully young—not that you could say that to her, unless you wanted to royally tick her off.

This was Her Imperial Majesty Petralka an Eldant III, and despite how she looked, we were only three years apart. But she looked *really* young and *really* adorable. Her elegant dress and the tiara on her head conspired to make her look like a doll. She wouldn’t have seemed out of place sitting in a glass case somewhere.

By the way, Her Majesty Petralka’s eyes were green, and her hair was silver. I.e., she was the self-proclaimed “little sister” from my dream this morning.

Admittedly, she was pretty much the embodiment of the “sassy

little sister” character, so it’s possible my deep subconscious had just substituted her for my own annoying sibling. But hey, setting aside the fact that I was basically woken up by some bizarre fetish, good job, subconscious. It was a hundred times better than waking up to a dream about Shizuki.

“Myusel,” Petralka said. “How is your health?”

“Very good, I’m grateful to say,” Myusel said, bowing deeply once more. “And I owe it all to Your Majesty’s kind and generous—”

“Th—The people must know that they can trust their ruler to be fair-minded in all things,” Petralka said before her praise could grow anymore fulsome. “We simply cared for you as we would for any of our subjects.”

I think I mentioned that Myusel was wounded protecting Petralka. I found it very interesting that in such a stratified society, this one point seemed very fair. Maybe it was just Petralka. She had pretty much hated Myusel at first, but now the two more or less got along. The profound difference in their social status meant it would be wrong to call them friends exactly—especially in the castle, where other people would be watching—but apparently, they were close enough that when Myusel was released from the hospital, Petralka asked her to stop by for tea. Even the fact that Myusel, a commoner, was treated in the royal hospital, which was normally reserved for imperials and nobles, was itself a sign of how Petralka felt about her.

I came from modern Japan, where having a tea party didn’t seem like that big a deal, but from the perspective of the Eldant nobles, who all desperately wanted to get even a little bit closer to the empress, Petralka’s attitude toward Myusel would have been something to be deeply jealous of. Not that Myusel herself seemed especially aware of this.

“And you, Shinichi. Is your work proceeding smoothly?”

“Yeah, no problems to speak of,” I said. “Wait... I submit a report every day. So you already know what’s going on, right?”

“I do, but...” A shy look came over Petralka’s sweet face.

Her Imperial Majesty the Empress was deeply interested in otaku culture. It was her backing that had allowed Amutech, the company of which I was general manager, to create a school to help establish the baseline of education that would be necessary to spread otaku culture.

As I, a former NEET and shut-in, knew very well, manga and anime were an excellent pick-me-up. The empress had duties to attend to, and couldn’t easily go anywhere because she would have to take a contingent of bodyguards and her arrival would cause such a stir. For her, works of fiction that could help her feel better in just an hour or so would probably be a great comfort.

“There was that... incident,” Petralka continued. “Garius is rather

concerned.”

“As well I might be.” The words came from a silver-haired hunk standing next to Petralka’s throne. He basically looked like the embodiment of the perfect knight. This went way beyond “hot”: his features were arranged just so, his hair as long as a girl’s. Like Petralka, he seemed less like a flesh-and-blood human than some delicate piece of art, so perfect it was almost scary.

He was Garius en Cordobal. A relative of Petralka’s, and a knight, and a minister in the government on top of that. Despite his youth, he was at the top of the totem pole.

“Your Majesty, you are the Eldant state itself,” Garius said. “We knights strive to root out evildoers wherever they may dwell, but I must beg you to care for your own person as well.”

“Yes, we know,” Petralka said, sounding annoyed.

Garius, too, was referring to the incident in which Myusel had been injured. A terrorist organization had taken over our newly completed school, and Petralka had been taken hostage. For the empress to be captured by an anti-government faction was unheard of—I gathered that many elements of the government, not least the royal guard, had been deeply shaken. I didn’t know the specifics, but I knew there had been an inquest into who was responsible, and a number of people among the royal guards and those responsible for security were severely punished. Now, I was there, and I don’t think anyone could have stopped that attack. But it sounds like some people weren’t going to be satisfied until someone was held responsible. It was just that big a deal.

But whatever the case, since that day, Petralka had barely been able to leave the castle without a battalion of knights surrounding her. I saw it just once myself, and the sight reminded me of some old Japanese warlord traveling with their entourage. The way some royal knights rode ahead forcing everyone to kneel down so as to ensure no troublemakers could get close looked almost comedic to me.

Now, of course, it was impossible for Petralka to sneak away to visit my mansion or school. I went to the castle once every three days like this because it was so much harder for her to come to me.

But getting back to the present...

“Honestly, I’m a little surprised,” I said. “How do I put this? People are really picking it up fast.” As I spoke, I pictured my students in the back of my mind. I wasn’t trying to be flattering. The students at my school were soaking up the basic knowledge we offered astonishingly quickly, like sponges. There were even several people who could hold basic conversations without the rings—in other words, who had learned actual Japanese.

“Mm. Indeed. All of our subjects are exceptionally intelligent,”

Petralka said.

Admittance to the school wasn't limited to the children of the nobility, but even so, no matter what race you came from, only families with a certain amount of spare resources could afford to send their children to study. There wasn't much we could do about that.

Dry land soaks up water, as they say. Eldant was in a state of near war with its neighbor. There were no full-on attacks, but there was an ongoing series of border skirmishes, leaving the Eldant Empire without much room to develop culture. The whole populace, nobles as well as commoners, were starved for entertainment.

And then, in comes Japan's highly developed amusement industry—developed in the peaceful half-century after its own war—and the people were taking to it like ducks to water. Students learned eagerly about modern Japan; they wanted anything that would allow them to have a wider and deeper experience of the entertainment we were bringing in. But...

"Hm? What's wrong, Shinichi?" Petralka looked at me questioningly.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"We thought we saw a cloud pass over your face."

"Oh—Oh really? No, I'm totally cloudless. Er... well, not quite, but I'm fine, you know?"

As the general manager of Amutech, I should have been elated at how things were going. But...

"You outlanders seek to destroy our traditional values! You damnable invaders!"

That was what Alessio, leader of Bedouna, a.k.a. the "assembly of patriots," a.k.a. the terrorists I keep referring to, had said to me.

Sometimes, you're doing what you think is right, but it's hurting someone else in some way. I couldn't shake the thought that in that sense, what I was doing and what Alessio had done weren't that different, even if one of us was maybe a little more self-aware than the other.

I suspected I was just overthinking it, but I didn't have any way of disproving what Alessio had said. It was the Japanese government that had decided to operate Amutech. I was just some schlub they had made general manager.

"Anyway, uh, don't worry about it," I said. "Everything's fine. If things go too smoothly, you just start to worry more!"

"Is that so?" Petralka said with a wry smile. I had apparently managed to convince her that things were really okay.

But I could see Minori-san looking at me out of the corner of her

eye. Searching. Doubtful. Pitying. It bothered me a little.



The weather was perfect. We were on top of a hill. The dense grass was soft as a carpet, so pleasant that I wanted to just throw myself down and lie there. In the distance, I could see craggy mountain peaks, and the clear sky seemed to go on forever. It was starting to get a little chilly, but the crispness of the air felt good. Why, I could practically have burst out yodeling right then and there.

But there was one thing that reminded me that I wasn't standing in the Alps or something. The airborne lifeforms here went beyond just birds. At that moment, I could see sprites that looked like some kind of flying fish soaring through the air, as well as wyverns, the dragons that served as the mounts of the royal knights.

"Seriously, though..."

After dropping off Myusel at the hospital in the castle, I made for the "otaku training center" on the outskirts of town—that is, the school I had established to facilitate cultural exchange. I traveled by this world's favorite form of land transport, the bird-drawn carriage.

"...I can't believe I'm actually in a position to teach something to people," I whispered to the sky.

I had been a school non-attender where I came from, and now I was a teacher? Was this some kind of joke? Despite my misgivings, there was really no choice. My job title indicated that I was a merchant bringing Japanese otaku culture here to the Eldant Empire. If I wanted to move my goods, I would have to do more than just bring them over and leave them here. I would have to get the word out—and I would have to establish an infrastructure that would allow my products to realize their greatest value.

That was what the school was for, and that was why I was a teacher. But still...

"It's been three months already. Aren't you about used to it?"

The comment came from Minori-san, standing beside me. But this was the one thing I couldn't get used to.

We went through the main gate, through the foyer, and then into the school building proper. It looked so good inside, you would never have guessed it was a converted warehouse. All I could say was, dwarves were some dedicated demi-humans, and they knew how to do good work. Nothing looked half-baked or improvised, like a movie set. There were no seams, no unnecessary gaps, no posts in the way anywhere. You would think this place had been planned as a school building from the ground up.

"Good morning!"

I opened the classroom door and came in, and found fifty students already there. They were all in their teens, or at least close to that by human standards. But they were from all kinds of different races. About half were human, but the other half included elves and dwarves. Sitting along one wall a short distance away was a group of adults that numbered almost as many as the students.

These were the students' "minders." Basically, their servants. As I mentioned, most of the students at my school hailed from the nobility, or at least the more affluent commoner households. The families of farmers and skilled workers, where kids were usually expected to help out as soon as they could, didn't have the leeway to send their children to school.

A lot of noble families, though, believed that a familiarity with otaku culture would help their children get ahead in the world—not to mention the fact that the empress seemed to be crazy for it. So there were a lot of well-heeled young masters and mistresses in my tutelage—and of course, they never showed up alone.

But anyway.

Within half a day of issuing my initial call for students, I had filled up all fifty slots in the class. We weren't teaching otaku culture yet—we had to start with more basic things than that, like Japanese language and all the different kinds of knowledge that went along with it.

Personally, I wanted everyone, regardless of race or class, to be able to get involved in otaku culture. But it also seemed easiest to start with people who already had a baseline level of education and see how things went. Not to mention, the more people I got on my side with political and financial authority (Petralka was a good start), the better.

And yet, I still found myself heaving a sigh. What upset me wasn't specifically the fact that the students ignored me and didn't return my morning greeting. They couldn't have managed it if they'd wanted to. They were too busy glaring at each other.

Today looked like yet another day of very bad classroom relations.

"Argh, I can't stand the smell anymore! They stink from being outdoors!" exclaimed a girl in a dress worked with elaborate gold and silver embroidery. "I can't believe I'm in the same room with dwarves! It's bad enough being near them outside, but indoors the stench is unbearable!"

"I heartily agree with you, milady." A young man who appeared to be the girl's butler stepped away from the wall and stood next to the young woman. The butler was fair-skinned and slim, and his ears were obviously pointy—in other words, he was an elf. "Sons of merchants they may claim to be, but their roots are in the earth. I

gather they're quite talented at finding gemstones and putting up buildings, but everything they touch stinks of mud."

"What'd you say?!" A dwarf boy (at least, I think he was just a boy, even though he had a beard) jumped up, unable to take the humiliation any longer. He pointed at the elven butler and shouted angrily, "You elves have no pride, and I won't sit here and be mocked by you!"

"Pride? This when dwarves let themselves grow so fat that I can't imagine how they ever respect themselves. Ah, you're too terrible to look at!"

"Shut your mouth! You forest apes aren't good for anything but cutting down trees! You're so pleased with your magic, but what good has it done you? If you hadn't let the humans domesticate you, you'd be no better than animals now!"

"S-Such an affront I have never endured! We prize harmony with nature."

"Harmony? Hah! You mean you prize lounging around in the woods!"

And on and on it went. The argument spread like wildfire among the other elves and dwarves in the room, be they servants or pupils. They were beyond even just being personally insulting; this was about entire races to them. I thought I sensed a vicious cycle: hatred begat hatred. I know elves and dwarves are usually antagonists in fantasy worlds, and it looked like the demi-human races of the Eldant Empire were intent on carrying on the tradition.

"Aw, for crying out loud," I muttered, clutching my head. This was hardly the first time this had happened. These kinds of fights seemed to break out on a daily basis. It was bad enough that the younger people argued like this, but often the anger would spread to the adults as well, until the furor made it virtually impossible to conduct class. If Minori-san or I, both of whom had been invested with Petralka's trust, imposed ourselves on the situation, things would quiet down, but only temporarily. The sparks were always there, and the next explosion was just a matter of time. It was all too common to hear students exchanging barbs before or after class.

"They get along about as well as cats and dogs, don't they?" Minori-san said from beside me.

I could only sigh at the scene. "Equality might be a stretch, but I was hoping that by studying together they might at least learn to be a little less prejudiced..." I guess old habits died harder than I thought.

But even knowing that, it was too late now to schedule separate classes for the different (ahem) classes. Still, there was no question that things were getting so bad in here that I would soon lose all semblance of control.

Seriously, what am I going to do?

I honestly didn't have the courage to try to jump into the middle of this. It was time for my last resort.

"Minori-san."

"Yes?"

"Let's show them how you do it in the military," I said, clenching my fist.

We had always planned on having Minori-san in the classroom, chiefly because we just didn't have enough people to handle all the teaching duties. I wasn't sure how she would do with high-level otaku instruction, but she could certainly teach the basics of daily life.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean channel your inner Sergeant Hartman!"

"You mean abuse the students until they're no longer able to laugh or cry? I guess I could." She smirked. Then she stepped up to the lectern in front of the classroom.

"All right, you maggots!" she bellowed. "Class is starting! Quiet in the ranks!"

That's a WAC for you. Her daily workouts had given her serious lung capacity, and she was putting it to good use. Her voice cut straight through the arguing. I usually thought of her as pretty easygoing, but when she raised her voice like that I found myself unconsciously straightening up.

The adults shut their mouths and looked at her, and the kids followed a second later. The room suddenly fell silent.

Wow. That's really something.

What a lady! She looked so laid-back, but when she decided to get tough, she was really tough. *Way to go, Minori-san! It must be those giant lungs that make your chest so big!*

Such were the slightly sexual-harassment-ish thoughts of admiration running through my mind. Minori-san, for her part, was nodding in satisfaction at the students.

"That's better," she said. "He"—she pointed at me—"is Kanou Shinichi, the principal of this school, and I am his assistant. He's not your only instructor—I'm going to be at this lectern, too, and I warn you not to forget it."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am," said one of the students. Then the rest of them chorused the same thing, their heads low. You would hardly have taken them for a group that had been at each other's throats just moments before. Minori-san had taken control of them in a way you could only do in a feudalistic society. Then again, dictatorial control was a tenuous thing. One wrong move, and you might end up like a certain northern neighbor. It was a scary thought.

"Okay, first we're going to teach you some basic vocabulary that

will aid in your comprehension of otaku culture.”

Suddenly Minori-san was starting the lesson. Wait... Basic vocabulary? Did she mean, like, *moe*? But heck, even the word *otaku* was pretty ill-defined. It seemed like a difficult subject to just jump into. Or was she talking about stuff like *archetype* and *two-dimensional*?

Minori-san clasped her hands behind her back and said, “Everyone, repeat after me.” She was standing ramrod straight. It was pretty impressive, actually.

I was slightly disturbed by the prospect of starting with rote repetition; it felt a little bit like we were flirting with brainwashing. But I guess we sort of had to take the Spartan approach—if we didn’t take a firm hand, the students (and their attendants) would be so busy arguing with each other that they would never spare us a thought.

There’s a school of thought that says you have to start with outward form, and from that perspective, beginning by cramming them full of vocabulary was certainly one way of going about things.

“All right then, lesson one,” Minori-san announced, her eyes growing wide behind her glasses. And then, with great gravitas, she intoned, “*Total bottom!*”

I just about fell over.

What the hell kind of words does she think we’re teaching around here?!

Children are curious creatures, and one of them immediately raised his hand and asked, “Teacher, what does ‘total bottom’ mean?”

“It means one who bottoms—totally! It indicates that you desperately wish to be made love to by the people around you. But note! This word pertains only to men, chiefly those who are pene—”

“Minori-san, stop! Hold it right there!” I broke in.

“Yes, Shinichi-kun? What is it?” She looked genuinely mystified. It was adorable! So adorable I couldn’t believe she was older than me. But never mind that!

“We’re talking to kids, here,” I said. “Let’s leave off the yaoi talk. You know, the... R-rated stuff.”

“Shinichi-kun, I thought you brought over some ero games?”

“Hey, those are for my personal—wait! I mean, don’t you think they’re a little *young* for this stuff?!” I was definitely starting to sweat now. I thought I’d been really sneaky bringing in the over-18 stuff, so Minori-san and Myusel wouldn’t know about it. How had she found out?!

“...Fine, then,” Minori-san said, looking distinctly disappointed. I had heard there were actually a lot of otaku in the JSDF, but this...

“All right, let’s try something else,” Minori-san said, turning to face the students again. “Cross-dresser!”

“Gaaaaah!” I thought I might claw my way right through the

chalkboard. I had thought she might be—but then I'd hoped perhaps not—but it turned out she really was...!



“C-Cross-dresser...?” The students, as well as their servants, were thoroughly flummoxed. Our magic rings, our “interpreters,” essentially worked via telepathy; they didn’t allow us to actually understand each other’s languages. So when they heard the term “cross-dresser”—which was actually a complicated pun in my native Japanese—there was a good chance the rings simply couldn’t translate the full meaning of the term. The class got only the dimmest idea of what was being said, and it left them confused.

That was fair enough. But Minori-san, apparently oblivious to the reigning confusion, continued to shout in military fashion, “Pay careful attention to intonation! Cross! Dress! Er!”

“Cross! Dress! Er!”

“Next! Absolute territory!” Geez! *I* knew that that was slang for the skin that showed between a girl’s high socks and her skirt, but how was anyone here supposed to know that?

Nonetheless, the students dutifully repeated, “Absolute territory!”

“One more! Yandere!”

“Yandere!”

The students were completely in her thrall. I looked out at the crowd of humans, elves, and dwarves all chanting various otaku words. It was utterly surreal.

“She’s an even worse otaku than I am, isn’t she...?!” I muttered, but my voice couldn’t be heard over the shouts of “Cross-dresser!” and “Absolute territory!” I sighed deeply, but they didn’t hear that, either.

Chapter Two: The Beast-Spy

Despite the occasional hiccups, our school was really coming along nicely. Notwithstanding the daily fights among the students and their servants, our pupils were remarkably studious—as I had reported to Petralka earlier, their education in both the Japanese language and otaku culture was proceeding apace. School dramas are plentiful in anime and manga, so I wanted the students to have some sense of what it was like at a Japanese school. I generally modeled our schedule and daily classes on the workings of a middle or high school back home.

Then again, the range of classroom activities—showing videos, reading manga or light novels aloud to the class, or bringing in my computer so I could show off some games—probably would have looked to any real teacher like we were just playing around.

But never mind that. Something else I said earlier was that dry ground soaks up water. The Eldant students, starved for genuine entertainment, absorbed Japanese language and otaku culture much more quickly than I'd expected. Of course, they were studying a single subject for six hours a day, and they were also enjoying themselves, which meant engagement was high. Add to that the desire (once again, as I mentioned) to get close to Empress Eldant, and maybe it wasn't so surprising that their studies should be going so well.

However, we were quickly exhausting the curriculum I had devised. Hence I resorted to giving the students “free-study time” for a while. Thanks to the solar panels and emergency generators the JSDF had set up for us, we were mostly able to keep the power on. We had also obtained ten computers and taught the students the basics of how to use them. There was no internet yet, but computers specialize in the storage and retrieval of information, and my hope was that the students would be able to study more efficiently.

“I guess you can't just throw them into the deep end, though...”

“What are you talking about?”

Minori-san and I had finished another day's classes and were in a bird-drawn carriage on our way home. Our seats faced each other across the coach; Minori-san sat on one side while Myusel, whom we'd collected from the castle, and I sat on the other. Apparently, the hospital had given her a clean bill of health, and she was already thinking of nothing but the work she had to do—chiefly, preparing

this evening's dinner.

"Otaku culture always has this kind of ambiguous line between creator and audience," I said.

Minori-san looked at me quizzically for a moment. I thought I'd lost her, until she said, "Oh, you mean like how people are amateur doujinshi creators at Comiket one day, and the next they're pro manga-ka?"

I knew she was an otaku.

"More or less," I said. "I can't help thinking that the whole top-down approach isn't the best."

"Hmmm," Minori-san said, but she didn't look quite convinced. "Don't you think maybe you're just going a little too fast, Shinichi-kun?"

"You think so?"

"No matter what we do, I don't think the people of Eldant are going to be making their own doujinshi or holding their own Comiket for years, decades even."

"Sure, I agree, but—"

I stopped short, picturing how diligently the students studied and how well they remembered their lessons. At that rate, was it possible...?

Just as those thoughts were running through my head, Minori-san suddenly narrowed her eyes and took her smartphone out of her back pocket.

"What's up?" I asked, thinking she must have gotten a call from someone. She didn't answer, but only fiddled with her phone, a dangerous look in her eye.

Huh? She's not usually so serious...

"Minori-san?"

"Just a second." She tapped on the window of our carriage and got the driver to come to a stop. We were only a few minutes away from home. Why in the world would she want to stop here?

"Seriously, what's up?"

"Just... hang on..." Minori-san continued to play with her phone. She was in work mode now.

"What's Koganuma-sama doing? Is something wrong?" Myusel asked.

"Good question," I said. "I wish I knew..."

We watched Minori-san silently for a few minutes, until she announced, "There's an unknown figure lurking around near our house."

She must have gotten some kind of warning on her phone. The JSDF is often pictured as having to get by with outdated technology, unlike, say, the expansively budgeted US Army, but in reality they

seemed to have a lot of cutting-edge stuff. They might not be quite as up-to-date as the American military, but they appeared to have developed small observation robots.

Still—

“Unknown? You sure it’s not Brooke?”

“He’s registered with the system. He shouldn’t set off the intruder alert,” Minori-san said.

Some of those little robots I mentioned were, in fact, in use at our house as a simple security system. I had seen Minori-san placing several self-propelled monitor bots, about the size and shape of rugby balls, around the house once. I gathered that the JSDF really wanted a more robust security system but held back, maybe due to budgetary concerns or out of consideration for the Eldant Empire. I guess when you’re renting a house from an empire, it’s probably not the best idea to install a full-scale security system without asking anyone.

“Plus,” Minori-san said, picking up the suitcase at her feet and pulling out the 9mm automatic handgun within. She still carried the pistol at her hip, just like she always had, but ever since the incident with the terrorists, this suitcase had become her primary weapon. Both guns used 9mm rounds, but this one wasn’t designed for targeting one specific spot to bring your opponent down. These bullets shattered into pieces; the idea was to help clear out anyone who was getting too close.

“Brooke wouldn’t be hiding in the bushes, would he?” Minori-san concluded.

“True. He’ll fall asleep anywhere it’s warm, though!”

“This person is obviously smaller than Brooke.”

So there was someone sneaking around, trying to get close to our mansion. I had no idea who it might be.

“Wait, that’s...” With the 9mm still in one hand, Minori-san zoomed in on the feed from the observation bot on her phone and frowned at what she saw.



The bushes rustled as someone moved through them. They were definitely acting like someone who didn’t want to be seen. They moved from shadow to shadow, staying behind cover, never stopping anywhere exposed. Slowly but surely they approached their objective. It was straight out of *Me**al Gear S**id*. I resisted the temptation to throw in some narration, like, “This is Snake.”

Then, our mysterious visitor peeked out from behind a tree.

I was surprised to discover she was a young woman.



I couldn't tell exactly how old she was, but I would stand by "young." She had healthy skin tanned a light-brown color, along with short-cut brown hair. The eyebrows above her big black eyes were on the bushy side; she definitely had a certain charm.

Her green, loose-fitting trousers were tied at her ankles, and she was wearing leather sandals. A white tube top was wrapped around her chest, leaving exposed the smooth curve of her belly and the line of her shoulders—but it didn't come off as vulgar, just pleasantly attractive.

Obviously, she wasn't heavily dressed, but she seemed to be a traveler of some kind, because she had a bulging brown cloth sack on her back.

But her outfit wasn't what surprised me most. It was her ears. At first, I couldn't quite see them because they were hidden by her hair, but then I saw that she had triangular ears covered in brown fur.

Do you suppose she has...? I wondered, and looked down at the lower half of her body—where I caught glimpses of a furry tail the same color as the rest of her hair!

It was! A beast girl! An honest-to-God werewolf!

Man, this Eldant Empire really covers all the bases! What with the elves and dwarves and lizardmen, I wondered if— But there really is—!

I clenched my fist, my heart surging with moe feelings, but I at least had enough self-control not to shout out loud right there in the carriage.

"Hrm..." The beast girl rooted around in her pack and pulled out some rolled-up lambskin paper, a drawing board, and a charcoal cylinder. She hung the string on the drawing board around her neck, placed the paper on top of that, and began running the charcoal busily around the paper, looking at our mansion the entire time.

The charcoal made a scratching sound as she worked. I guess she was drawing a picture... Why? Had she snuck up to our mansion just to steal a sketch from the shadows?

She shifted slightly, and I could see what she was drawing. At first glance, it looked like she was trying to fit way too much on one piece of paper. But these were no mere doodles; she wasn't just making lines at random. As the picture on the paper came together, it was obvious that it was our mansion, along with the windmill visible in the background, and the school building. In fact, the windmill and the school looked like they were already done. She was focusing on our house now.

The girl was able to vary the thickness of her lines by how much pressure she placed on the charcoal. I don't know much about drawing, but her picture looked pretty darn good to me.

More troubling, though, was the content of her picture. The windmill had been converted into an electric generator by the JSDF to help provide power for the school and the mansion. It was, in essence, a power station.

What's going on...?

This beast girl appeared to be sketching our buildings—which was to say, Amutech's facilities.

"Guess that about does it," she muttered in a voice with an unusual intonation. Then she set aside her charcoal. She took the strap of the drawing board off her neck and knelt down, reaching into her bulging backpack. She took out a leather cylinder, the sort of thing you might receive official documents in. She opened the lid, rolled up her newly completed drawing, and put it inside. She secured the top and used her teeth to make sure the strap was tied down tight, then—

"Don't move."

—she froze on Minori-san's order. Maybe it wasn't just Minori-san who convinced her. Maybe it was the 9mm handgun she was holding, or the two JSDF officers flanking her, each carrying a Type 89 assault rifle. The moment we had confirmed an intruder near our premises, Minori-san requested backup from the nearest JSDF base. (Granted, what passed for a base here was a part of the dormitory in the nearby castle town that was being rented out by the Japanese military.)

The Holy Eldant Empire didn't have guns, so this beast girl couldn't have known what the weapons were. But Type 89s have a bayonet on the end, and the way the soldiers were holding them probably would have alerted anyone that they weren't friendly.

"What's this? Wh-What's going on around here?!" the beast girl said in surprise.

"This area is off-limits to civilians," Minori-san said in an authoritative and very military tone quite unlike what I was used to hearing from her. Moments like this definitely reminded me that she was a soldier. "Didn't you see the sign?"

"I—I can't read!" the girl cried, holding her hands up as if to say, *I surrender*. Evidently that gesture is the same no matter which world you're in. Not that this was the time or place to be intrigued by such details.

"There's a picture along with the words," Minori-san said sharply. "The sign is located where anyone coming down the path would see it. So either you saw it and ignored it, or you deliberately took an unusual route to get near this place."

Whatever she was after, the beast girl had definitely looked like she was trying to avoid being seen.

"I—I swear I'm no one suspicious!" the girl said desperately. Of course, that's just what a suspicious person would say.

“Identify yourself.”

“I’m Elvia Harneiman, and as... as you can see, I’m a wandering artist!”

“An artist, huh?” Minori-san glanced at the tube that the beast girl—Elvia—was holding. “You were drawing a picture, that much is for sure.”

“Sure it’s for sure! I’m an artist, and that’s what an artist does!” She pulled out her lambskin paper and unrolled it. Now that I had a chance to get a good look at her sketch, I could appreciate how talented she was. It was almost photo-real—she had captured the essence; every detail was there. I was amazed to realize someone could do such a precise drawing using only charcoal.

“Artists aren’t the only people who draw pictures,” Minori-san said.

Well, that was true enough. Technically, anyone can draw, regardless of how talented they are or aren’t. And her evident fixation on Amutech’s buildings... There were no guarantees that she wasn’t a forgotten element of the “assembly of patriots,” plotting how to kill me.

“But we’ll hear what you have to say,” Minori-san went on. Through the eye of the robot monitor as displayed on the smartphone, I saw the two soldiers with Minori-san approach Elvia. For safety’s sake, Myusel and I had stayed in the carriage, and I had watched the jumpy video with Myusel interpreting for me. Only now did I finally breathe a sigh of relief.



Elvia Harneiman, eighteen years old, wandering artist.

That, at least, was what the beast girl insistently repeated after the soldiers had apprehended her. Admittedly, everything in her personal effects seemed to back her up. But why would an itinerant artist have suddenly decided that our mansion was the thing she most wanted to draw? Forget about the power plant-ified windmill and the school building—the mansion was a pretty normal noble dwelling by Eldant standards, not something interesting or unique enough to warrant a sketch.

And that seemed to suggest...

“She’s a spy,” Minori-san said.

“A spy?!” I exclaimed.

We were in my office on the second floor. Elvia, still in handcuffs, was sitting on a chair, but Minori-san and I had taken off our rings in order to converse with each other. This way, neither Elvia nor any human in the Eldant Empire would understand what we were talking

about. Myusel, though, had picked up a smattering of Japanese over the past four months, which posed some issues regarding confidentiality.

Speaking of Myusel, she was in the kitchen getting dinner ready, so she wasn't present; Brooke was out taking care of the grounds as usual.

"When you say spy," I said, swallowing heavily, "you mean like 007, or *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, or 'Good morning, Mr. Phelps'? That sort of thing?"

"For a guy in his teens, you sure make some obscure references."

On that note, the TV show *Mission: Impossible* was broadcast in the 1960s, long before Minori-san and I were born. But that's what reruns are for—I saw them on cable—and there was that big-screen reboot they did a few years ago.

"Yeah, I guess those shows aren't very popular anymore," I said.

"Well, this is no television show," Minori-san said with a wistful smile. "The Eldant Empire isn't the only country in this world, and espionage is alive and well."

"Now that you mention it, I heard something about border skirmishes, too." Having said that, I never quite got the sense of urgency that you might expect of a nation at war. Maybe what happened in the borderlands just didn't translate to the way things felt in the capital.

"The Eldant Empire has a lot of citizens, and so many of them are of different races that getting a spy into the country isn't that difficult."

The place wasn't surrounded by oceans like Japan was, either. If they really wanted to, it wouldn't be so hard for someone from another country to cross the mountains and sneak in, or maybe even dig a tunnel over here. Unlike a certain Earth nation, it probably wasn't possible for the Eldant Empire to build a wall all the way along its border, with watchtowers and everything.

"But why spy here?" Why would a spook sketch our mansion?

"Think about it. If something unusual was happening near the enemy capital, with a bunch of people you'd never seen before, and a group that appeared to be military was setting up buildings—wouldn't you be curious?"

"I get it." That made sense. I suspected no one thought that this "enemy country" was just setting up a center for otaku learning. If we weren't careful, they might mistake it for a military facility of some sort. And it was, after all, members of the Eldant military and the JSDF who had put the buildings up. It was an understandable misunderstanding.

But even so...

“You really think she’s a spy?” I looked at Elvia again. Perhaps having realized that we weren’t immediately going to kill or torture her, she seemed to have relaxed somewhat. In fact, even when she had been captured and bound, she hadn’t seemed too intimidated—almost as if she had expected that it might happen, had been mentally prepared for it. That lent some credence to Minori-san’s hypothesis that she was a spy.

Yet when I looked at that open face, it just didn’t say *spy* to me. I would have thought a spy would kind of... give me the heebie-jeebies or something.

“And... what exactly do we plan to do with this person?” I asked.

Minori-san’s response was firm and immediate. “When you capture a spy, you interrogate them and then kill them.”

“Say *what*?!” I could hardly speak. I mean, I knew she was right, but...

“Eldant laws dictate what happens here.”

“Sure, I mean, yeah, but...”

No matter how many times I looked at her, Elvia just seemed too... easygoing. She didn’t look wild or crazy enough to be a spy. She looked less like someone on the front lines of information warfare and more like... I dunno. Some kind of subcontractor just doing her job, with no idea what was really going on.

“...she just doesn’t strike me as a spy,” I concluded. I looked at Elvia; she looked back with that open, frank expression. It made me think back to the mutt we had kept at home when I was a kid. It was the tail that caused me to make the connection—that, and the slightly vacant expression.

To my surprise, Minori-san nodded and said, “That’s true enough. It’s just possible that she doesn’t actually realize that what she’s doing is spying.”

“Uh, really?”

“Granted, I was using a robot observation system, but it was awfully easy to find her, and she seems a little... out of it. She doesn’t seem very intimidating, does she?”

Well, that’s what I’d been trying to say. And those qualities would get a spy captured right away, wouldn’t they?

“I think she may be just one of many, being treated like disposable goods.”

“Yikes,” I groaned. I guess numbers tell eventually... Could an enemy state have employed bunches of spies, knowing that some of them would be captured and killed? It would certainly mean they didn’t have to do too much training of their personnel, and in a medieval world where life was cheap, a strategy like that could have a certain twisted effectiveness. But it was also a deeply disturbing idea.

Especially if the spies didn't know they were being used.

I looked at Elvia sympathetically, causing her to respond with an expectant *Yes, what?!* expression. She was too big to pass for a pet, but the way she behaved and her overall warmth made her seem awfully friendly. It was impossible to dislike her. She wasn't exactly beautiful, but she had a sweetness, like the dog you can't stand but love at the same time.

And they were going to interrogate and then kill her like some bad over-18 rape *doujinshi*? You know, "They ABC her and then they force her to 1-2-3, and then they X her Y and Z using a you-know-what...!!" (Redacted in compliance with the Tokyo Municipal Government's Statute for the Healthy Raising of Boys and Young Men.)

With these thoughts running through my head, I soon found myself in danger of panting out loud. But this wasn't some work of fiction we were dealing with—this was actually going to happen to her! This wasn't just a story that would go away when you shut the book.

"She wasn't trying to steal military secrets or anything. Don't you think there's a chance of, you know... clemency?"

"Just a second," Minori-san said with a sad smile. "Shinichi-kun. Do you... feel sorry for her?"

"I mean, kind of... I... I know I'm being naïve." When I heard Minori-san talk about interrogation and execution, though, I just wanted to help the kid. Maybe I would have felt different if she had been an obvious enemy coming at us in a frontal attack, but I just didn't feel like I had been wronged by this girl.

"Now I get it..." Minori-san nodded. "You're all moe for animal ears, aren't you, Shinichi-kun?"

"Wha?! I—I am not! But yes, they're nice!"

"Which is it?" she asked, smirking.

"No, listen! I'm not trying to cover for her because of her animal ears! I'm doing it because she's another person. But that doesn't change the fact that animal ears and tails are nice!"

I struggled to explain. Truth be told, I had been itching to touch Elvia's ears and tail for a while now. These weren't clip-on accessories like for a costume; these were real, living, moving, body-heat-carrying, beast-girl animal ears and tail! I had taken another step closer to the ancient dream of all mankind! *Ahh, I just want to give her a big hug and feel how fluffy she is!*

"Shinichi-kun. You're drooling."

"Oops..." I quickly wiped my mouth.

When I looked over at Elvia, she was shrinking down into her chair. She must have sensed some kind of danger, even though she

couldn't understand what we were saying. *No, Elvia! I'm not like that! Please don't look at me with those frightened eyes!*

"But anyway," Minori-san said, crossing her arms, "we're not in a position to object to whatever the Eldant Empire wants to do."

"If we don't say anything... I don't suppose they wouldn't find out?"

"Shinichi-kun," Minori-san said with a hint of exasperation. "Have you not realized that we're being watched?"

".....Huh?" I stared at her, wide-eyed. *Watched?* "You mean... by the Eldant Empire?"

"Yes. I suspect that knight, Garius, is behind it. Don't look out the window," she said, holding her phone out to me. The screen displayed a photograph. It definitely looked like it had been taken on the sly. It depicted something like a bird sitting in the branches of a tree. I say "something like" because although it looked sort of like an owl, it had only one eye, smack in the middle of its body. It seemed more like a gremlin than a bird.

"There are several trees around the house that always have these same birds in the same places," Minori-san said. "At first I thought maybe there was a nest nearby and this was just normal behavior, but they never move from those spots, and they're always looking in the same direction. Weird, isn't it?"

"That's... yep. Weird is the word I would use."

How did she ever notice them, anyway? I was confident that I would never have picked up on them. As, in fact, I hadn't.

"We don't know what exactly the magic in this world is capable of, but these things are probably keeping an eye on us on behalf of the Eldant Empire. I guarantee they know about Elvia already."

I didn't say anything. So we really wouldn't be able to hide her.

"Of course, there's a chance that you might be able to intercede with the empress or Garius on her behalf..."

"Me?"

"Don't you realize?" Minori-san was still wearing that same smirk. *Realize what?*

True, I was the general manager of Amutech. But that didn't make me any better positioned to contradict the Eldant government or army. If I was going to debate with them about something, I would have to have some pretty convincing arguments on my side.

Hmm...

If Elvia really was a spy, was there some way we could get away with not killing her?

"Hold on..."

I knew what to do in this situation. The quickest way for me to come up with a solution would be to think back to my manga and

anime and games and light novels. I had learned a lot of things—in fact, most of my important life lessons—from them. They were manuals for living, practically textbooks. If there was a way to save Elvia, maybe I had seen or read it somewhere.

I drew on the vast and otherwise useless knowledge I'd accumulated during my stint as a home security guard.

Spies. Espionage. Secret intelligence agencies!

Spies were always connected to betrayal and plotting...

“Oh! I've got it.”

I gave a satisfied nod.



The next day, we appeared at Eldant Castle with Elvia in tow. Minori-san was convinced that staying quiet about her would cause needless misunderstandings on the part of the Holy Eldant Empire. No matter how much Petralka might like me, there would surely be some disgruntled courtier who would find this a convenient excuse to kick us—and maybe everyone Japanese—out of the Eldant Empire.

“So you've come, Shinichi-kun.”

I had turned Elvia over to the knights for the time being and was walking down a hallway through the castle when I found a middle-aged man standing in my path. What set me on my heels when I saw him wasn't the fact that, in the middle of a giant castle that couldn't have looked more medieval, he was wearing a salaryman-style suit. It wasn't the salaryman-style part in his salaryman-style salt-and-pepper hair. It was the way his bureaucratic exterior brought back memories of my daily life in Japan, a life I'd left behind the moment I arrived in this world.

His name was Matoba Jinzabourou. At first glance, he looked like just a midlife worker drone stuck in a dead-end job. But in fact, he was head of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau; i.e., the organization responsible for all exchange with other worlds, including the Holy Eldant Empire. We were technically in different organizations, but he was basically my superior.

From my perspective, he was also my touchpoint with the Japanese government. Matoba-san actually lived in the same house as I did, but unlike Minori-san, he frequently traveled back and forth between Japan and the Eldant Empire, and we only rarely saw him around the mansion. It had been at least ten days since I'd seen him last. It wasn't his fault, though—he was the guy responsible for handling all the red tape.

“I hear you apprehended a foreign spy,” he said.

“Uh, well, it was really Minori-san who did the apprehending,” I

said, indicating the WAC beside me.

The perfectly honest truth was, Matoba Jinzaburou rubbed me the wrong way. In spite of his totally average exterior, I found him weirdly difficult to get my head around. Plus, the reason I was general manager of Amutech here in the Eldant Empire was because this man had tricked me.

“Hm. Well, I’m glad you didn’t attempt to shelter her out of some misguided sense of compassion. That was quite wise of you.”

Yikes! Was I that easy to read?

On the other hand, I had expected that he might say something like that.

“The Empire is rather on edge after those... unfortunate events.”

“I’m aware of that.” I gave Matoba-san a slight bow and walked by him. Frankly, I didn’t feel much like talking to him right then.

Ever since the incident with the “patriots,” I had found it harder and harder to trust the guy. Or, for that matter, the Japanese government. I couldn’t shake the sense that behind their innocent veneer, they were willing to do whatever it took to achieve their goals, and the thought scared me.

“Her Majesty is waiting,” I said by way of excuse as I slipped by.

“Indeed. Enjoy your visit.” Matoba-san didn’t seem bothered at all, but only watched us go.

We were in the same audience chamber as the day before. Not the big one that was used when all the ministers and everyone were in attendance—the smaller one that was just for when a few close associates were meeting with the empress. There was one minister, however, someone who hadn’t been present the previous day. The prime minister, specifically. Zahar. He stood next to Garius, who stood next to Petralka’s throne.

Prime Minister Zahar was a thin old man, sort of the stereotypical prime-minister type. He had obviously led a full life, and was now using his experience to advise the important people of his realm. He was soft-spoken and often smiled, and despite his age, he didn’t give much sense of being withered or weak.

Prime Minister Zahar was Petralka’s main advisor when it came to politics and economics. Garius, meanwhile, helped her with military matters. Or anyway, that was the impression I had gotten from watching them over the past several months. In other words, at that moment, I was looking at the beating heart of the empire.

And...

“Court Artist?”

...all three of them, the most important people in the Eldant Empire, were, at the moment, collectively looking at me as if I had

lost my mind.

“What exactly are you talking about?” Garius asked in exasperation. Petralka and Zahar didn’t say anything, but from their expressions it looked like they were thinking the same thing.

Well, I couldn’t blame them. Here in the Eldant Empire, when you found a spy from an enemy country snooping around, standard operating procedure was to torture and then execute them. Minori-san had explained to me that this was partly about sending a message to any other spies who might be thinking about sneaking in... but, she’d added, it wasn’t without a certain emotional motivation, either.

“There’s a good chance that the werewolf in question is a spy from the kingdom of Bahairam,” Garius said. He went on soberly, “We have no firm proof, but circumstantial evidence makes it extremely likely.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I said. I knew *innocent until proven guilty* wasn’t really the way things worked around here, but still... “You might be right, but what about the off chance that...”

“That what?”

“That she isn’t... guilty...”

“One is guilty until proven innocent. That is what allows the state to endure,” Garius said curtly.

I thought that might be the case. My shoulders mentally slumped. The Eldant Empire wasn’t exactly up on the latest thinking about human rights. I could talk about false charges until I was blue in the face and it probably wouldn’t mean anything to them.

That meant my only chance was to try a different approach. Petralka and Garius would both listen to reason if they knew there was some benefit to it.

“In any event,” Garius said, “I don’t think the disposal of a spy falls within your stated responsibilities.”

“Maybe not,” I said as nonchalantly as I could. I had the distinct sense that if I gave any hint that I sympathized with Elvia, it would only cause them to doubt my motives and refuse to listen. “But if she really is a spy, I think it would be more advantageous to the Eldant Empire to let her live—and give her to me.”

“Come again?” the knight asked, with an expression that clearly said he doubted my sanity.

“This used to happen all the time in my country—as you can tell from how often it shows up in manga and anime and stuff. If you kill her, there’ll just be another spy later, right?”

“Obviously. All the more reason to arrest and execute them when they—”

“But you won’t find that next spy right away, will you? They aren’t going to be all, ‘I’m a spy!’ at the border crossing.”

Garius narrowed his eyes. “One imagines not. And...?”

He was starting to look almost interested. Not interested in me! No. Just in what I had to say. This was definitely not a flag tripping.

“Well, what if you let her live, let her make her reports like usual? To this kingdom of Bahairam or wherever. But she only tells them the things we tell her to say. It doesn’t have to be the truth. It could be the opposite of the truth, if you want.”

“Hrm. What is this you’re proposing?” Petralka was looking at me dubiously, but as I had hoped, Zahar and Garius seemed to have grasped what I was trying to say. I saw comprehension and surprise slowly dawning on their faces.

“Deliberately feeding them misinformation,” Garius mused.

“Right. Wouldn’t that give us a chance to manipulate them?”

Say we were to have Elvia report that a particular part of the border was lightly defended. The enemy would charge in—but of course, we would have a major force waiting there.

“Mm,” Garius muttered. “It’s certainly possible. Rather underhanded, but... undoubtedly more beneficial than simply killing her.”

“Undoubtedly. Definitely more beneficial.”

“But would this ploy work more than once?” This time it was Prime Minister Zahar who spoke. “Once the enemy discovered that their spy’s information was unreliable, that indeed acting on it only brought them to grief, they would never trust her again.”

“No,” I said with a shake of my head, “they wouldn’t.” The important thing here was to smile as knowingly as possible—like one of those corrupt merchants working with an evil official in a samurai drama. “And that’s exactly the point.”

“...I’m sorry?” the Prime Minister said.

“If such a worthless spy were to go back to her home country, she would be executed immediately, wouldn’t she?”

The minister and the knight looked at each other for a moment. Then Garius looked back at me. “Kanou Shinichi. You—” Just for a moment, fresh astonishment colored his handsome, pale face. Then he began to smirk. “I see. Yes, very interesting. We take her in, bring her to our side.”

Yep. That’s what I was going for.

If Elvia’s report was the reason her country ended up getting mauled—well, what spy could go home then? And with nowhere to go except the place she already was, she would have to protect her newfound homeland.

“And you certainly couldn’t keep her anywhere that had anything to do with the military,” I said.

“That’s true.”

“And as it happens, my place really doesn’t have anything to do

with the military.”

It wouldn't do us any harm if Elvia let slip a few tidbits about what was going on at Amutech. If anything, keeping an eye on her in a place where she couldn't get any military information would neutralize her, and as long as she kept sending word back home, there wouldn't be any more spies.

“Anyway,” I went on, “art is important in otaku culture.” In manga and anime obviously, but even in games and light novels. “It looks like she can draw. It might be helpful to have someone like that around.”

“Hmm.” Garius and Zahar looked at each other again.

Petralka finally broke her silence. “Shinichi,” she said, “we hope you're not trying to protect this Bahairam spy.”

“Huh? Uh, oh, uh, why—why would you hope that?” I said, trying to look curious and innocent at the same time. “I'm just, you know—trying to be reasonable and do the... the best thing for the kingdom.”

This was bad. I sounded nervous; it was going to give me away.

“Reports inform us that this spy is a young woman.”

“Uh, now... now that you mention it, I guess she is. Fancy that!” I felt sweat start to trickle down my armpits. *“Fancy that”?! What are you thinking, Kanou Shinichi!? You're acting super suspicious! She'll figure you out for sure!*

As I stood there cursing my slow wits, Petralka narrowed her eyes and said, “And is this young woman, perchance, well-endowed?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Are you trying to protect her because of her large breasts?”

“What, you're still upset about that?” I blurted, but then quickly shook my head. “I mean, no! No, she isn't and I'm not!”

This conversation was definitely not going the way I had expected. I remembered Petralka once expressing some jealousy that Myusel's chest was larger than hers. I had wanted to tell her that not all guys go for big boobs, and that in her case, a huge rack on that tiny body would look really weird anyway—but it would only have made her mad, so I had swallowed the words.

“Anyway,” I said, “her breasts aren't the important thing about her!”

“Oh no?”

“No! It's those animal ears and that animal tail—they're moe beyond belief!”

Petralka looked at me silently. The temperature in the room seemed to plunge.

“I mean, uh, never mind!” I said, holding my hand up as if I were swearing in a court of law.

The truth was, I had been so taken with Elvia's ears and tail that I

hadn't paid much attention to the rest of her. Looking back on it, I guess she had a pretty good chest. I thought. I'd have to check later. When it came to werewolves, I definitely pictured someone slim. Shapeliness was more moe than sheer size.

Waitwaitwaitwaitwait.

"The point is," I said, clearing my throat, "I want you to give her into my custody. If things really turn bad, just take her back and torture or execute or whatever her then. But I really don't think she's going to be much of a problem."

"Very well." I was surprised how readily Garius agreed. Maybe it had to do with those one-eyed owls Minori-san had pointed out. Maybe Garius was thinking that if we and Elvia were in the same place, it would be that much easier to keep an eye (literally, I guess) on all of us. "If it's that important to you, Kanou Shinichi, then I believe we can release the spy into your care. If Your Majesty agrees?"

"...Hrm. Well." Petralka didn't look very enthused, but she didn't have any concrete reason to object, either. And with the two of them in favor, Zahar wouldn't argue.

"Awesome!" I whispered to myself. I had scored an illustrator.



"So there you have it." We were in the dining room on the first floor of the mansion, which we also used for meetings. I was speaking to Elvia, whom we had brought home with us. "There was no definite proof that you're an intelligence agent, so you're being let go."

"Phew! Thanks for your help!" Elvia said, scratching the back of her head even as a huge, bright smile blossomed on her face. At the same time, her ears were twitching. Man, did I want to touch those ears. "I thought they were gonna have me killed for sure."

"Well, uh, not to put too fine a point on it, but... they were." I smiled sadly.

Incidentally, it being dinnertime, Myusel, Brooke, and Minori-san were all here in the dining room with us. Since Minori-san had seen everything that went on at the castle earlier, there was nothing left to surprise her, although she still looked a little exasperated. Myusel, however, looked shocked. As for Brooke—well, he didn't say a word or move a muscle, which made him hard to read, but I figured he was probably surprised, too.

I decided I needed to twist the knife just a little further. We couldn't have her getting overconfident and spying on us again.

"This is definitely a gray zone," I told her.

"What's a gray zone? Are you talking about the color of my fur?"

"No, I mean we didn't prove that you're an intelligence agent or a

spy, but normally that just means they'd lock you up until they knew for sure."

"Guh?!"

This obviously left Elvia deeply shaken. Don't tell me... Did she really think she had gotten off scot-free? Maybe she wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer...

"I—I swear I'm not either of those things!" she said, looking at each of us desperately. "I'm not a spy or an—an intelligence agent! I don't have anything to do with the kingdom of Bahairam!"

"Huh," Minori-san and I said, looking at each other. Neither of us had mentioned the name Bahairam in front of Elvia.

On that note, the Eldant Empire was involved in border skirmishes with a total of three different nations, so suspicion of spying didn't necessarily directly equate to suspicion of being an agent of Bahairam. Garius had simply figured Bahairam was the most likely culprit in this case based on a number of different things.

"And," Elvia went on, "nobody ever said anything to me about drawing pictures of things that look like military secrets from every possible angle and sending them to them!"

Okay. It's... It's time to shut your mouth. For your own sake.

It looked like Elvia had a bit of the klutz about her. Animal ears and clumsy? Score.

Someone who leaked worse than a sieve in a rainstorm didn't seem like the sort of person you would want to do your spy work—but like Minori-san said, maybe these spies were considered disposable, so nobody cared if some loose lips got in the ranks.

"Ah, whatever," I said. "You were drawing pictures, right?"

"Yes, but I swear they weren't anything—"

"I happen to need an illustrator right now. And I'd like to hire you."

"...Huh?" Elvia looked at me blankly.

"You were sketching this mansion because you were interested in it, right?"

"Th-That's right, but..."

"Well, I'm inviting you to live here with us. In exchange, you prioritize work for me. You'll be our in-house illustrator, essentially." I had to make sure I wrapped this conversation up before Elvia said anything else incriminating.

The beast girl gave me a strange look. Then she looked at Minori-san, Myusel, and Brooke in turn. She saw that none of them shook their head at the idea, and so her mystified gaze came back to me.

"C-Can I really?" The hesitant way she asked was oddly cute.

"Let me tell you something about us," I said.

I wanted to create a dictionary to help spread the Japanese

language, but since so few people could read around here, that wouldn't be enough to make otaku culture popular. The perfect solution would be something like a picture book, or one of those illustrated children's dictionaries. The people of the Eldant Empire were already used to seeing pictures on signs and such; a book like that would probably be very approachable for them.

What was more, it wouldn't do to just import every vaguely otaku-ish item I could think of. Even in our own world, a movie or game might get an R or an X rating based on its content. Or think about how in some countries the blood in fighting games is red, in others it's green, and in still others it has to be taken out entirely.

If we were going to make similar alterations to the content we brought the Eldant Empire, we would need someone who could draw.

I heard once that there were certain countries where there was particular concern about sexual mores, to the extent that there were artists who specialized in drawing bikinis on the naked girls in anime and manga shower scenes, for example.

"The only condition is, you can't go out on your own. Okay?"

Since it was now obvious that Elvia was a spy for Bahairam, we couldn't let her into too many Eldant facilities, especially the military ones, even if we decided it was okay for her to see the inside of our house. If she was discovered sneaking around again, there would be no avoiding the death penalty. If we were going to take her outside, we would also have to make our own preparations to feed her false information.

"Er... Sure. Got it." She nodded. It looked like she had finally gotten it through her head that if she refused, the only things that awaited her were a jail cell, unspeakable torture, and the hangman's noose, in that order. I felt a little bad for her, but I would be pleased if she was thankful to at least have her life.

"I look forward to working with you," I said to the still somewhat-perplexed beast girl.

Chapter Three: Run Silent, Run Deep

Cause and effect.

Since the two are so often directly connected, we come to expect that they'll always go hand-in-hand. If you press the switch, the machine turns on right away. If there's a cause, the effect will be immediately apparent. Or so we tend to think. But that's not how it actually is.

Most changes are small, so small that we can't see them. A plant growing, for example. Sprouts shooting up, flowers blossoming—those may involve explosive changes at the cellular level, but those changes are much too small for us to observe by just sitting and watching. We only tend to notice changes in plants after something major has happened—when it finally becomes visible to us, we're really being thrown into the middle of things.

So I believe there must have been signs. It's just that they were too small, and I didn't see them until they became something big.

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

The shout smacked me square in the face the moment I opened the door to the classroom.

"Why, you insolent—!"

"Look who's talking!"

More than one voice was shouting. The yelling started a general buzz in the classroom, the air growing tense. This was bad. I didn't know exactly what was wrong, but I could tell it was trouble. Acting on an almost instinctual danger sense, I jumped into the room.

"Will somebody tell me what's going on?!"

It had been about five months since I'd started the school, and classes as such were going smoothly. A little *too* smoothly, in fact. I was nervous. The students were picking up otaku culture—or rather, Japanese and the other related foundational stuff we were teaching—very quickly, helped by the personal computers we had put in the self-study area for free use. With Matoba-san's help, we had brought in large-volume hard drives chock full of anime, which the students were enjoying along with manga and even light novels.

One corner of the classroom was home to some figurines—mostly capsule toy-sized stuff, brought in as "samples"—which people could freely pick up and look at.

My only real complaint about the environment was that we had

no internet yet, but that was understandable. Everything else was great.

On top of that, we got a flood of applications from nobles who wanted their children to attend the school. Maybe they had heard about it from our first generation of students. The upshot was that instead of waiting for the next school year, we started taking new students right away, and the school's population doubled to more than a hundred pupils, with another hundred still waiting to get in.

At this moment, however, there was an almost unbearable tension in the classroom.

"I've put up with this until now! But I can't do it anymore!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth!"

Right in the middle of the large-ish room, about twenty students had made a circle with their chairs. Half of them were elves and half were dwarves. Double that number of humans were watching from a distance.

Elves and dwarves, as I had learned from personal experience, didn't get along very well. Left to their own devices, their arguments frequently devolved into fistfights. Minori-san and I had scolded them sternly for that sort of thing, and the number of fights had gone down recently, lulling me into a sense of security. A false one, it now seemed.

After all, if they couldn't blow off some steam every once in a while, the mutual unhappiness was eventually going to explode.

"Crap...!" I was about to rush into the middle of the circle. But just then, one of the elves jumped up, practically knocking over his chair.

"I'm telling you," he shouted, "*Save Me, Big Brother! 4* is the most complete entry in the entire series! The graphics are sharp, and it's got all kinds of different kiss scenes. And all the gameplay elements involved put it on a different level from almost every other gal game!"

The speaker was an elf wearing what amounted to coke-bottle glasses. (Where did he get those? Those weren't even common on Earth anymore.) What was with the visuals here?!

"*The graphics*, he says! Those graphics are average at best!" Now it was one of the dwarves shouting, a blue vein bulging on his forehead. "Have a look at the pack-in figure from the limited first edition of GS3 Soft's *Onee-chan Sword*! She has a brassiere made out of pearl, a sword with a completely convincing metallic texture—and the smoothness of her skin approaches art!"

"Average?!" another elf bellowed. "You wouldn't know graphics if they bit you in the neck! *Cloud* is life! Everything necessary to existence can be found in it! I've—I've learned so much from that game!"

“Say what?! I suppose two-dimensional characters are appropriate for someone whose life is as flat as yours!”

“Hah! A mud-dweller like you could never appreciate such a subtle and refined story!”

“Just you say that again!”

“Oh, you wanna go?!”

Um... You guys...?

As I stood open-mouthed, another dwarf broke into the conversation. “That’s enough, both of you!” This new speaker was probably just a teen, but his long beard made him look like an old man already. But never mind his age—what mattered here was that someone with a cool head had shown up. I felt a rush of relief.

Naturally, it didn’t last long.

“Gal games?” the dwarf snorted. “Figures? Good lord. Booooooring.” Wait, wasn’t he supposed to be helping them make up? “If you have to argue, why not pick a more honorable topic, as we do?” he said confidently. Anyone else in that situation might have been looking down their nose at their listeners, but since dwarves were so short, he actually had to look up at the elf. It was sort of funny. “I refer, of course, to the Loli-Dwarf Protection Council!”

“That bunch of pedophiles?!” the elf exclaimed.

“Watch your language! Dwarf women all look forever young. Their small statures mean that even in adulthood, they hardly appear to be teenaged. They are eternal lolis! Angels among us! It’s the duty of gentlemen like ourselves to make sure they aren’t preyed upon by those with twisted predilections!”

“Oh, quiet! You realize that ‘gentleman’ isn’t a synonym for ‘pervert,’ right?”

“Hah! Ha ha ha! That word is practically a badge of honor for us!”

And on and on it went.

With a lukewarm glance at the gentleman-pervert loudly declaiming his views, I backed up a few steps and quietly closed the door.

Okay, I knew I wasn’t in any position to judge any other otaku. But... But this...

Elves and dwarves arguing passionately about ero-games? What was even going on here?

Anyway, I think you guys need to start by apologizing to Professor Tolkien and Mizuno-sensei!

I mean, sure, I was the one who had left them manga and anime and games and said they could check out whatever they wanted. And yes, I was the one who insisted that as long as we were going to all this trouble, we ought to have the original, uncensored versions, and brought in the 18+ editions of everything instead of the clean ones.

But still, I think you're all growing up too fast!

"This is awful..."

Could this be—you know? Like when you bring drugs into a place that's never had so much as a vaccine, and it works too well?

"I feel like this has all kind of blown up since I got here."

Now that I thought about it, medicine usually came with dosage instructions. The math wasn't simple, though—just because you cut the dose in half didn't mean the effect would be half as strong. Or sometimes, if you didn't use at least a certain amount, you wouldn't get any effect at all. The other side of that coin was that sometimes, if you took more than the prescribed dose, the effect would be massively amplified.

That's right: this was basically an allergic reaction.

"Yeah, right..."

I zipped down the hallway to the next room—the self-study area and library—and peeked in. This was where we kept the computers with all their data, not to mention piles of manga and anime and DVDs just like I had at home, along with a mountain of light novels I had planned to introduce once the kids could read enough Japanese. Since a lot of anime start out as light novels, I thought we could read something related to a series they had already seen as a way of getting them involved.

How naïve I had been.

"Yikes..."

Smack in the middle of the library I saw a student with a treasure trove of dictionaries around him, scribbling something on a sheet of lambskin paper. I recognized his curly golden hair. He was the son of a noble family and had been especially quick to pick up the language; he could already read and write Japanese at a middle-school level.

"Um... Hello?"

No answer. He stayed silent as the grave. Or rather, he remained totally absorbed in whatever he was doing. He didn't even seem to know I'd come in.

I crept up behind him and looked over his shoulder. To his right was the sheet of paper; on the left was a book being held open by a wooden frame.

It was a light novel.

"Wait a second..."

It looked like this boy was working on translating the light novel. Obviously, that wasn't something I had assigned. He had decided to do it himself. I suspected he was working on something that hadn't yet received an anime adaptation, or a series where he wanted to know what happened.

His fixation—his passion—was intense.

Actually, I thought I had heard that in Taiwan or someplace, there was some otaku who had learned Japanese just because he wanted to be able to read light novels in the original. This was the same sort of thing. Japanese people in Japan already have access to their country's profusion of entertainment, so they don't hunger for it like this.

I directed my gaze farther into the room. There was a big desk there, and ten or twelve boys and girls had their notebooks open and were talking about something. The group was diverse, with three or four people each representing humans, elves, and dwarves. It seemed like some sort of study session...

"Ah..."

After observing them for a few minutes, it struck me. I detected a pattern in their conversation. Age and other factors notwithstanding, all of the human children were giving off a sort of "sempai" vibe toward the demi-humans. They were looking down their noses a little and acting a bit entitled. I guess even kids find it hard to break out of the habits they've been taught for as long as they've been alive.

But still... They're all sitting at the same table, aren't they?

Alessio of the assembly of patriots would no doubt have considered this sight to be an undermining of culture. Even if the extreme nature of his views was unique to terrorists, there were plenty of conservatives who thought along similar lines. The children they brought up would think the same way. From that perspective...

"...I guess it's a step in the right direction," I murmured to no one in particular. Then I left the library.

I wondered if there were any other changes I hadn't noticed. With that thought in mind, I looked out the hall window. I could see everything behind the school building. Surrounded by a short earthen wall was a flat area where we had planted some grass—in effect, a schoolyard.

This was another of my ideas. There was no special need for outdoor classes if we were only going to teach otaku culture, but eventually I wanted to introduce manga about tennis and baseball, and when that happened I wanted the students to be able to play sports themselves.

Not that we had any tennis courts or baseball diamonds yet. All we had was some grass and a few trees growing inside the mud wall. We hadn't even planted the trees ourselves. They had already been there; we just built around them.

One tree, right in the middle of the yard, was especially big. I could see close to a dozen people gathered in its shade. They were focused on an elf boy. He had a light-colored, loose-fitting cape draped over his shoulders, and he was clutching a stringed instrument, about the size of a small guitar, to his chest. He was pretty obviously a

bard. Come to think of it, Myusel had mentioned to me that with their long ears, elves had a uniquely sharp sense of hearing and affinity for sound.

I could hear a gentle melody coming from the instrument. And then a clear voice, rolling along with it.

“Tejas had always been slender; to be blunt, she had the body of a virgin child. It left clothing loose upon her, so that when she put on an apron, it would slip to the left or to the right with her every movement. Her pale skin would thus be exposed; yes, there was even the promise of the cleft of her chest, the hint of which many a time drove lusty young men near to madness...”

I mulled over what I was hearing.

“Of course,” the bard went on, “if her skirt came up as it had earlier, all was plainly visible. ‘I’m not quite sure where to look...’ ‘I see!’ Tejas nodded. Indeed, she seemed quite experienced at this. ‘It gets you hot and bothered, doesn’t it?’ ‘Don’t say that!’ ‘You have a *bokki*, don’t you?’ ‘You can’t get away with saying that just because you used Japanese!’ ‘By the way, in English, a *bokki* is called an erection! ☆’ ‘And I do not!’ ‘Then there must be something wrong with you, Master!’ Tejas said to him...”

Wait—was he reciting a light novel? In *song*?

Don’t get me wrong. I adored light novels myself, from moe harem stuff to serious-downer battle pieces. But what the heck was a bard doing reciting them to the accompaniment of his... his lute or whatever?!

Even as this torrent of would-be interjections went through my mind, though, it dawned on me: he was imitating me. How many times had I shown some anime DVD to the students while adding my own explanations?

The magic rings we were all wearing allowed people who didn’t speak the same language to communicate essentially by telepathy, but it didn’t work if one of the participants was an inanimate object. You could put a ring on a DVD player, but it wouldn’t translate the Japanese into Eldant. So I would always sit by, explaining what the words and pictures meant, like the intertitles in an old silent film.

It looked like the young elf guy had taken a light novel that got turned into an anime, copied the soundtrack by ear, and then adapted the translation done by that kid I’d seen in the library.

Uh... Hmm.

“This... is good, right?” I said to no one in particular. I scratched my cheek.

True, I had planted the seeds. But to my surprise and, now, my belated anxiety, they had sprouted in forms I had never expected.

When I got back to the mansion, I found Myusel running around,

looking very busy. She was pretty much solely responsible for taking care of the inside of the house, so there was always plenty to do, but still, I didn't think she normally seemed this overworked. I wondered what was going on.

She didn't even seem to notice I'd come home. That made me feel a little lonely, in a way. Hearing her say "Welcome home, Master" was an important way of replenishing my MP (by which I mean Moe Points).

"Myusel?"

"Oh... Master," she said. She turned to me, still holding a huge basket with both hands. Then maybe she tripped on something, or maybe she just lost her balance, but whatever the case she took a terrific tumble. Just, *bam*.

"Eeek!" The contents of the basket spilled all over the hallway, and Myusel went down hard.

"Ahh! I'm— I'm so sorry!" I hurried over to her. Luckily, it looked like it had only been cloth in the basket, and it helped soften her fall. Anyway, she didn't seem to be injured as far as I could see.

"Are you okay?!"



I grabbed Myusel's hand and helped her up, then looked down at whatever had scattered all over the floor. It looked like dirty rags, but there were streaks of different colors here and there on them. I wasn't sure where discolorations like that could have come from.

"What are these?"

I mean, they looked like laundry, but...

"They're Elvia-san's... clothes."

"Elvia's what?" I picked up one of the pieces of cloth and took another look. It was white with a gold border...

"Whoa, whoa!" I stiffened.

Elvia, as I already knew, tended to leave a lot of herself exposed—you know, the bare-midriff look. She wore loose-fitting pants (kind of desert-chic), but when it came to her upper body all she had was a tube top. Her shoulders, collarbone, and belly button were all just right out there. Frankly, she might as well have been wearing a swimsuit for all the skin she was showing.

So she basically had a bikini and underwear, and I had just grabbed at least one of them.

"Whoa, I didn't—I don't—!"

"Master?" Myusel blinked at me.

"I didn't! Let's get our stories straight! I definitely did not grab this thing because I'm the type who gets all *pant pant* over a girl's underwear, okay?! For me, it's all about her body—I mean, no! Just forget I said that!"

I suddenly found I had taken this piece of Elvia's clothing in both hands and was holding it up to Myusel as if making a sacred offering.

"I'm... very sorry..."

"M-Master?" Myusel didn't seem to have the slightest idea what the big deal was, but she accepted the clothing from me.

"But anyway," I said, "I've never seen clothes get dirty quite like this..." They were covered in streaks of color, the slashes looking like wounds.

"I believe she said her clothes always get this way when she's drawing," Myusel said.

"Drawing...?"

It finally dawned on me. The streaks were from her charcoal and crayons. Initially, Elvia had only ever used charcoal, but I had gotten her some new art supplies. She didn't seem to take to the pencils, markers, or paint brushes right away, though. Instead she went straight for the thing that most resembled her easy-to-use charcoal: crayons.

That was fine as far as it went. But apparently, any time she changed from charcoal to crayons, or from one color of crayon to

another, she would wipe her fingers on her clothes. And so, three or four streaks would slash across the fabric—the same marks I was looking at now.

“She’s not some kid who eats with her hands,” I muttered. “Why would she do that?”

Myusel cocked her head slightly. “She claims that otherwise the colors run together, and she doesn’t like it.”

“...Huh?”

According to what Myusel told me, Elvia had mainly used charcoal throughout her artistic life, so she had never much needed to switch from one art supply to another. Even when she did, it would just be to a new stick of charcoal. Not something to be too concerned about.

Crayons, though, had all sorts of colors. For someone who had been a sort of “monochrome specialist,” the colors in even just a 12- or 24-pack of crayons were striking. Around here, art supplies of specific colors were made with special dyes, and they were much too valuable—and much too expensive—for someone like Elvia to dream of owning. So she was thrilled by the crayons and started using them immediately.

As we all know, if you hold a crayon long enough, the color starts to bleed onto your fingers. But suppose your fingers turn red from a red crayon, and then you grab a blue one. Elvia figured the colors would run together, and she didn’t like that idea. So she was wiping each color off her hands with a convenient cloth as she went along.

And by “a convenient cloth,” of course, I mean her clothes.

“Aw, for crying out loud...” How hard was that beast girl going to make things for me?

“She gets very absorbed in drawing her pictures,” Myusel said with a smile.

“Is that so?”

Honestly, I found that a little surprising. I had set Elvia to drawing otaku pictures, to which end I gave her some “reference material” (anime images and manga of about the same quality, along with design books) and free access to my office.

I was given to understand that people who weren’t otaku themselves often took the visual style in anime and manga to be simplistic and easy to draw—a cut below more realistic types of art. But actually, because your choice of how to convey information becomes more restricted the more highly symbolized something becomes, “anime art” has its own challenges above and beyond “normal” art. I knew that especially well, what with my mom having been an artist for ero games. She used to say that if realism and detail were the only things that mattered, art would have gone extinct the

day the photograph was invented.

And Elvia? She was versed in highly realistic art. Part of me was worried she might push back against the “anime style,” maybe demand to know why she had to do such cheap-looking pictures now. But I seemed to have worried for nothing.

“I’m glad she’s so dedicated,” I said, looking into the basket again. I could see now that it wasn’t just her shirts, but her pants in there as well. “But I’m not sure I like how much extra work she’s making for you, Myusel.”

“Oh, it’s fine! It’s no problem,” Myusel said, a little too quickly.

“No problem? You were already busy, weren’t you?”

Frankly, our mansion had always been too big for one maid to handle on her own. Minori-san helped Myusel sometimes, but she couldn’t do it every day. I was actually thinking about asking Petralka if we might be able to get another maid for the house. That’s how sorry I felt for Myusel. Plus, I was the one who had brought Elvia here.

“But isn’t Elvia-san helping directly with your work, Master?”

“Huh? Sure, I guess. Even if we’re in the early stages right now.” I nodded.

I was putting Elvia to work doing otaku-friendly drawings because I hoped in the future to experiment with producing doujinshi locally and the like. It’s pleasant enough to enjoy entertainment products for their own sake, but when consumers decide they want to become creators, that’s the sort of thing that can make the world a smaller place—a friendlier place, maybe. That would be exciting.

Plus, ultimately, having an artist around would dramatically increase my options when it came to the paperwork I submitted to the Eldant Empire. She could make it pop a bit.

“So she’s helping me,” I said. “So what?”

“She’s helping you, and I... I don’t have any talents...” Myusel couldn’t quite bring herself to look at me. “All I can do is clean, and cook, and do the laundry... I can’t do anything to help my master... If I can help Elvia-san in her work by taking care of the wash, then that... that will help you, too, won’t it, Master?”

I was silent.

Ehrmahgawd. CUUUUUUUUUUTE! This girl, she’s... she’s heroic!

My moe gauge hit max. I practically felt like there must be some special skill I could activate. Then there was the way she looked at the ground sometimes. It just really *fit* Myusel. One wrong step, even one wrong half-step, and that sort of thing would feel like a complete affectation. But with her, and only her, it seemed totally natural and not remotely like a put-on.

But never mind that.

“No no no no no,” I said with a vigorous shake of my head. “Forget *all* or *only* or whatever. Cleaning and cooking and laundry? Those are the building blocks of life. If you could never draw a picture, it wouldn’t kill you, but the stuff you do? We’d be starving in our own filth without you. I’m able to work hard because you work so hard.”

“You really think so...?”

“I sure do. I really appreciate what you’re doing.”

“Master...” Myusel looked at me with real joy on her face.

Oh no—no! Those watery eyes and that sweet face! I can hardly stand it—! My heart was just about pounding its way out of my chest as I reached out for the basket Myusel was holding.

“Let me help you.”

“You don’t need to! I appreciate the thought, but—”

“Don’t worry, just let me help. If you fall again and hurt yourself, I’ll be even worse off than you.”

“W-Well, all right... Thank you.”

I took the basket, and Myusel and I headed for the back of the house.

Suddenly, I had a thought. “Hey... You said you don’t have any talents, but you can use magic, right?”

“Well, one or two spells, yes.” Myusel shrugged, almost shyly.

During that infamous run-in with the terrorists, I had seen Myusel send one of the “patriots” flying with a magical attack. As best I could remember, it was called “Tifu Murotsu,” or Storm Fist. As the name suggested, it summoned a powerful wind that slammed into your opponent.

Demi-humans here in the Holy Eldant Empire had limited options if they wanted to gain civil rights on par with the humans in the country. The simplest choice of all was to do military service. Myusel herself had spent about two years in the army, and given elves’ predisposition for magic, she had learned the magical arts there. I know it sounded like a bad joke to think that my cute little maid had once been a soldier—but then again, we have countries even on Earth that see military service as a civic duty and require all citizens to do a stint in the forces.

“I think being able to use magic is a pretty serious skill.”

“Aren’t you a magic-user yourself, Master?”

“Huh? Oh—you mean this?” I took out my smartphone and pointed to it. “This really isn’t any different from a sword, or... more like a stew pot or a kettle. Anyone can use it if they know how. It might look like magic, but it’s just a tool.”

Myusel looked a bit perplexed. “Magic is just a tool too, isn’t it?”

“Uh... Kind of, but isn’t it more of a talent, or a skill?”

“Don’t you need certain skills to be able to use that tool?”

“I guess so... I mean, you do have to learn how it works.”

I guess they do have tests proving how good you are at using computers, so maybe being able to use a smartphone is an admirable ability, too.

That was when it occurred to me: this was a difference in values. For Myusel and other people from this world, the ability to use magic was completely and totally unremarkable. Thoroughly un-magical as I was, I was the only one who thought it was really cool. But we could say the same thing about electronics from the Eldant perspective.

Hang on. That means...

“Do you think I could use magic, too?”

“...Aren’t you using it right now?”

“Huh? Wait—do you mean this?!” I looked down at the ring on my finger.

“Yes, sir. It’s very small-scale, but still.”

“Ahh... Now I get it.”

The ability to activate a magic item you had equipped was evidently a form of magic use in itself. From what Myusel was saying, the magical power to use the ring wasn’t supplied by the ring itself; it was coming from me. It was convenient to talk about the rings as if they were doing all the work, but there was actually magic involved.

“So if I learned the spell, could I use Such-and-Such Fist like you?”

Myusel nodded. “Since you’re a human, Master, maybe...”

Some races, like lizardmen, were said not to have magic—but apparently that didn’t mean they had no magic at all. Properly speaking, these races didn’t have *enough* magical power to manifest it externally, and even if they managed to do so, the effect would be negligible. So even if they were able to use magical items to achieve specific effects—in which case it would be the item manifesting the magic and not them—they weren’t able to chant spells, break seals, or perform other magical actions.

To come at it another way, because humans had been the first to invent the system of abilities called magic, humans were generally able to manifest magic outwardly via their actions.

“Huh... Okay.” So magic was actually more of a tool, a skill—at least in this world. “That’s interesting.”

We came out behind the mansion and walked toward the bucket of water that was reserved for doing the wash. Myusel dumped the laundry in, obviously used to this. As I watched, it occurred to me that there was something I wanted to ask her.

“Hey, Myusel?”

“Yes?”

“Could you teach me some magic?”

“Yes, sir, right aw—”

Then she froze.

“Y-You want *me*? To teach *you*, Master?” She was staring at me wide-eyed. “How could I ever dare to—”

“No one’s daring you.” I smiled. “Or is there some kind of law or custom or something that says you can’t teach me?”

“There is, but...”

Because magic was a tool that could be used—and turned into a weapon—by anyone who knew how, it was strictly controlled by the state. If you just leave a weapon lying around, someone will eventually pick it up and use it to commit a crime. Hence, those who had learned magic in the army of the Holy Eldant Empire were forbidden from teaching it to others without permission. And permission was granted only if the learner held a noble rank of knight or above. That is to say, only if they were part of the ruling class.

“I see... That makes me kind of a strange case, doesn’t it?”

I was being treated as a noble, certainly, but in reality I was just a foreigner. Would it be a crime to teach me magic? We wouldn’t know without asking the likes of Petralka, Garius, or Zahar.

“Either way, I could hardly venture to teach you anything, Master. And the magic I know is really only the most basic spells. I left the military before I learned anything more...”

As Myusel told it, you were taught three spells when you entered the army. One was a fire spell, one was wind magic, and the third was healing magic. In other words, these were the three things they thought would be most useful to someone as a soldier. But the stronger spells, the stuff that could maim or kill somebody—they didn’t teach you that until you rose up the ranks. Now that I thought about it, Tifu Murotsu hadn’t been a one-hit kill or anything. And the fire magic might look spectacular, but it wasn’t very powerful; it was really only good for starting campfires or disinfecting things. Even the healing magic was mostly for cuts and scrapes; it wouldn’t bring your arm back if you got it ripped off, or save your life if you were hemorrhaging blood.

I supposed that made sense. You wouldn’t hand out the most powerful weapon you had to every foot soldier in the army, either. Once they had served for a while and you were sure they were good and loyal, then you could teach them more powerful magical attacks.

“No dice, huh?” I murmured. Gee, and life would be so interesting if I could use some magic.

All the talk of teaching brought something else to mind. “Since we’re on the subject, how’s your Japanese study going? I haven’t been able to help you much lately...”

Ever since the school had started up in earnest, I had just been too

busy to look after Myusel's studies. But since she had reached a point where she was pretty capable of reading and writing, studying on her own would get more and more effective.

"I'm managing," she said, smiling shyly. "I understand a fair amount of what you say even without the ring."

"That's really something," I said. But truth be told, the same was true of me. I hadn't been going out of my way to study, but when you're constantly receiving "broadcasts" of a second language, with an ongoing simultaneous interpretation... Well, the way the images from the ring's "translation" came into my head along with the spoken Eldant words was starting to feel pretty normal.

I had been hearing the language for half a year at this point, so it made sense that I had started to get used to it. I guess that's immersion for you. Having said that, I had never studied the local writing system, so I still couldn't read the language.

"Master," Myusel said suddenly. "You'll go back to your home country eventually, won't you?"

"Well, I mean, maybe sometime," I said. My tone was nonchalant, but it was only after I'd spoken that it struck me. Of course I didn't figure I would be with Amutech for the rest of my life. There probably would come a time when I went back to Japan. If the world on the other side of the hyperspace tunnel knew about Eldant by then, fine, but if not, my freedom would forever be restricted by the chains of secrecy.

And that meant that one day, I would probably have to say goodbye to Myusel and everyone else in this world. Myusel had once said she hoped she could go with me when I went back to my country. At the time, I had thought she meant as a trip—the way people like to take vacations to exotic places. But the more I learned about the situation in the Holy Eldant Empire, the more I realized she might not have meant it so casually.

"But even if I go back, I'm sure it won't be for a long time yet."

The truth was, I hadn't been granted permission for even a temporary visit back to Japan. Maybe they didn't trust me yet. Matoba-san went back and forth all the time, but whenever I asked him about where exactly the famous wormhole was, he would suck his teeth, hem and haw, and ultimately not tell me anything.

I guess they wanted to make sure I wouldn't try to run away. The upshot was, I wasn't even free to go back to my home.

"So, Myusel, you're saying... if and when I quit this job and go back to Japan..." I could practically feel my own embarrassment; it was like a tingle in my skin. I hesitated for a moment, then dived ahead. "You think you want to leave the Holy Eldant Empire and go back with me?"

“Yes.” Her answer was immediate. It was almost as if she had been waiting a long time for me to ask that.

“...Izzat right...”

“Yes.” Then she added, a bit fearfully, “That’s if I’m allowed, of course...”

That probably had a double meaning—whether I would allow her, and whether the Eldant Empire and Japan itself would allow her. When it came to me personally, I sure didn’t have a problem. But as for our governments... Well.

It had only been six months. But it had been a whole six months. After half a year living with Myusel and Brooke, they had started to feel like family. I felt closer to them now than I ever had to my parents or sister during my days as a home security guard. Myusel in particular, given that we had survived a terrorist attack together.

As for Minori-san, obviously, she was living with me, too, and had also been through the terrorist incident. Yet I couldn’t help mentally putting her in the same category as Matoba-san—the Japanese government lurked behind both of them. It wasn’t much, but it made it harder for me to feel close to her.

I thought silently for a long time. *Would* I ever be permitted to go back to Japan? Or was I now a permanent resident of the Holy Eldant Empire? It was a dumb thought, but I couldn’t seem to keep it out of my head.

Truthfully, I didn’t figure a root-and-branch otaku like me could stay here forever. At some point I would start to suffocate for want of anime and manga and light novels and games, and I would beg them to send me back to Japan. That was what I pictured, anyway. As pathetic as it looked, even in my mind’s eye.

And on top of that...

Am I really qualified to move to the Eldant Empire?

If what Alessio had said was true, I was an invader, the tip of the spear.

I didn’t mean to be, and he didn’t exactly have irrefutable proof or anything. But I couldn’t categorically deny it, either. When I asked Matoba-san about it, he had given me an ambiguous answer. Which meant...

“Master?” I realized I had been staring at the ground, looking grim. Myusel was watching me with an expression of concern. “Is... Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No. Nothing... It’s nothing.” And then I forced myself to smile.



After dinner, I headed to Elvia’s room. She was in one of several

guest rooms on the second floor. Just for reference, Minori-san's room was next door to hers, and—let's be honest, here—Elvia's room had been thoroughly bugged with listening devices and cameras. Minori-san was keeping an eye on her. As you might imagine, I wasn't entirely comfortable with this, but since there was no question she was a spy, I couldn't exactly object.

But putting all that aside.

I was going to Elvia's room now because she hadn't come to dinner. In fact, pretty much ever since she had become our in-house artist—more precisely, ever since the materials and supplies I'd requested from Japan had arrived—she had hardly come out of her room at all. I suggested to her that she at least join us for breakfast and dinner, but we never saw her at the table.

Normally, it would be my job to give her an attitude adjustment. But when I saw Brooke drag himself to the table despite his fatigue just because I'd asked him to, it was hard for me to want to force another member of the household to come to breakfast, too. Plus, I had spent an entire year as a shut-in myself. I wasn't exactly in a position to criticize anyone for not leaving their room. So for the better part of two weeks, I had left her alone.

But I was starting to get worried. You'd think I could just check on her using the monitors we'd set up, but Minori-san turned me away. ("Sorry, Shinichi-kun, you can't.") I guess using a video monitor to peep into a girl's room is pretty skeezy, spy or not. I didn't press the issue.

Anyway, that's what led me to the artist's room to check how things were going with my own eyes and ears.

"Elvia?" I called through the door. "Elvia? Are you awake?"

There was no answer. I put my hand on the doorknob and gave a gentle tug. It opened. She hadn't locked the door.

"Um... I'm... I'm coming in, okay?" I murmured apologetically, and then entered Elvia's room.

No sooner was I inside than my eyes went wide and I froze in place.

"Y-Yikes....."

Books were scattered all over the floor; there was hardly any room to walk. Mostly they were manga, although there were a few coffee table-sized art collections as well. Several of the books lay open, with something like candlesticks holding them down. I saw that they were open to pages with titles like "How to Draw Cool Guys," "How to Draw Cute Girls," and "How to Draw and Color Clothing"—all kinds of instructional information.

And there in the middle of it all was, of course, Elvia.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor... And she was half-

naked.

I mean, she had a black cloth wrapped around her chest and hips, but it only just covered her bust, and passed between her legs like a loincloth. It would barely have qualified as underwear. The rest of her was bare skin... kind of. She was covered in streaks of charcoal and crayon in a whole rainbow of colors. In places the streaks were so wide that they concealed the skin beneath. She was quite a sight. I had already seen the laundry—maybe Elvia had decided it was all too much trouble and she would just wipe the wax and left-over charcoal directly on her own skin.

Luckily for me, this had the effect of blunting her eroticism, which took a bit of the pressure off me.

“Elvia...?”

Had she been in here drawing this entire time?

“Wait... I recognize this...”

When I looked closer, I saw a bunch of dirty dishes in a pile. Myusel must have brought them originally. It really reminded me of my time as a shut-in. In fact, if you replaced the dishes with plastic bottles and cup ramen containers, it would have been my room exactly.

Hold on... So how long has it been since she took a bath?! I don't care how animalistic or werewolf-y she is—a girl her age should care a little bit about hygiene, shouldn't she?!

I got up on my mental high horse. Yes, I had once been a shut-in, but for the record, at least I had bathed.

“Elvia? Elvia!” I weaved my way among the books using the small patches of visible floor. Sometimes to get from one patch to another, I had to jump like a sumo wrestler trying to surprise his opponent. Slowly but surely I made my way over to Elvia, calling her name the whole time.

The artist herself was surrounded by illustrations. When I got a better look at them—

“Wow...”

I was surprised to find they were true moe art. Myusel seemed to be her model; there were several illustrations of a smiling maid. They weren't colored, but they would definitely make an otaku happy. They were like manga or anime art that had evolved further away from realism.

As I've explained, just because this style of art isn't realistic doesn't mean it's easy to draw or that everything looks the same. If realism is what you're most interested in, you can't beat a photograph. The individuality of different artists would disappear. The real key to this style of art, and the way artists express their individuality, has to do with what you put in and what you leave out. The style is

abstracted, but you still have to decide which details count. And then there's "super-deformed" stuff, where you deliberately add an element of unreality.

From that perspective, these moe pictures definitely bore Elvia's mark. She had put her own spin on Myusel the maid, including the necessary information and leaving out what was unnecessary, emphasizing her cuteness and even making her look a little bit smaller than she was.

"This is incredible, Elvia, picking it up in such a short time..."

However, the most important person in this conversation, the artist herself, didn't seem to hear my praise; she was still stretched out over a piece of paper, running some designer's charcoal over it.

"Um... Elvia-san? Hellooooo. Elvia! Can you hear me?"

It was no good. There was no reaction whatsoever.

I looked over her shoulder at what she was drawing right then and found she was in the middle of an impressive illustration, something that could have been a full-on manga page, background and all. It showed Myusel—I thought it was Myusel—sitting by a window and smiling. It was totally adorable and plenty moe, even without color.

"But this..."

It made me uneasy in a way that was hard to describe. What could it be? I felt a bit like I had opened Pandora's box. I couldn't quite explain it, but I felt like we were on the verge of something very dangerous.

I was glad to see Elvia working so hard to master moe art. That had, of course, been my whole plan. But I was taken aback by how quickly her art style had changed. It seemed a bit too quick—dangerously so. Maybe I was overthinking it?

Thoughts of shapeless horrors whirled in my mind. And finally...

"Elvia!"

Almost spontaneously, I grabbed her hand to stop it from moving. The result, though, was that I was effectively hugging her from behind.

"Oh, gosh! Did you startle me!" The spell broken, she quaked in surprise—but at least she stopped drawing. "Shinichi-sama, I don't mind you coming into my room, but you could at least announce yourself."

"I did! Several times!"

"Oh, y-you did? Gee, I'm sorry about that. This is just how I get when I'm drawing..." She smiled ruefully.

Ah. That explained why she kept trying to get a better and better angle to draw our mansion, and didn't notice Minori-san and the guards sneaking up on her.

Okay, wait. Never mind that.

“Say, er... Shinichi-sama?”

“Yes?”

“Could we... save that for some other time?”

“Save wha—aaaahhh!” I realized my hand had ended up clamped on Elvia’s boob. I let go as fast as I could and got off her back. “S-S-S-Sorry about that!”

“Nah, it’s okay. I don’t really mind.” She laughed a little.

“Actually, I’m kind of proud...” She scratched her cheek.

Oops. She left some crayon streaks—wait.

“Huh? How’s that again?”

Did she mean she was proud of being sexually harassed? What was going on in that furry brain?

“Well, I am a werewolf and all...”

“I know that.” Her ears and tail were right out there for all to see. She was pretty much wearing nothing but underwear; they were hard to miss.

“But you’re a human, right, Shinichi-sama?”

“Uh... Yeah...”

“And they... don’t bother you?”

“What don’t?”

“My... ears and tail.” She pointed to each of them in turn.

“Bother me? No, not at all. Heck, I think they’re the most moe things about you.”

I had almost immediately ceased to pay them any mind. I mean, for an otaku, animal ears and a tail were par for the course, important moe stuff. Definitely not a negative in any way.

“Wait,” I said. “Are you saying... In this world, in the Eldant Empire or the Kingdom of Bahairam or whatever... ears and a tail are considered off-putting?”

“Well, yeah,” Elvia said with a sad smile. “Not among werewolves, obviously. Think about it—Bahairam and Eldant and most of the other countries around here, they’re controlled by humans, right? So the human form is considered the most beautiful. Some werewolves even cut off their own ears and tails so they can fit in.”

“Wow...”

Now it was starting to click for me. Human perceptions of beauty have always varied by time and place. You’ve got your otaku, who can get off on two-dimensional images, and then you’ve got the mainstream, where people just don’t understand what’s attractive about “those huge eyes.” Actually, you can check out *shunga*, erotic woodblock prints from the Edo era. Those were basically the equivalent of manga back then, but otaku today don’t get moe at all for them.

As for werewolves, it would make sense for them to consider the werewolf body the most beautiful, but long ages of living under human domination had made it so even beast people had come to accept human standards of beauty.

“So to have a human guy act hot and bothered over me,” Elvia concluded, “makes me a little bit proud.”

“No, uh, I’m sorry. That wasn’t why I was grabbing you.”

I mean, yes, I was hot and bothered, but that was a different story. *Calm down, little guy! This isn’t the time!*

“Oh, really? Too bad.” Elvia smiled without a hint of resentment.

Ahh. You know, she’s... she’s not bad.

She didn’t have that refined cuteness, the gorgeousness of Myusel or Petralka, but she did have a plain attractiveness. Even her easygoing demeanor was part of an unadorned sexiness. Then take all that and multiply it by *werewolf*.

“Plus, I owe my life to you,” she said. “I don’t think I’d mind if you were to get all over me.” She smiled brightly. I was almost a little disappointed not to sense anything impure in her.

“Er... Thanks?” It was all I could think to say. “Elvia, can I ask you something? You were really concentrating there. How long have you been drawing?”

“Huh. Good question.” She eyed the stack of dishes against the wall. “One, two, three... Hm. About five days, I guess.”

“That long?!”

That was definitely too many days to be doing anything nonstop. I was pretty sure I had heard news reports of somebody who dropped dead after playing an online game for three or four days straight.

“Well, how about you take a little break?” I suggested, but Elvia shook her head firmly.

“It’s all good. I want to work just a little more.” She reached into the bag next to her and pulled out a new piece of charcoal.

So she was just going to keep drawing? I guess that’s dedication. Or... craziness.

“How and why can you concentrate for that long?” I asked, the formless anxiety welling up within me again.

“Good question, too.” She looked at me like it hadn’t really occurred to her, and made a thoughtful sound. “I guess it’s... you know.”

“I really don’t.”

“It just kind of helps me feel better. Wait, that’s not quite it. How do I put it?” She shrugged her shoulders. “Werewolves are natural hunters and fighters, right? But now that we’re associated with settled societies, we can’t just do whatever we want. If we accidentally let our instincts run away with us, we can end up in serious trouble. Punished

way worse than a human.”

“Huh...”

In a world of class differences, it was possible—maybe even, to them, natural—that someone of high status would get off lightly for a crime that would bring major punishment for someone of a lower class.

“Yep. And most of us... Well, we’re taught how to channel those impulses. For me, it was art. I learned to look closely at something, study it, then draw it. In some ways, it’s not that different from hunting, right?”

“Sublimation, huh?” I muttered. I supposed that would work as a substitute for hunting, where she would use her no-doubt powerful senses to their utmost in order to catch her prey. She was just “catching” it on paper.

I get it...

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. She wasn’t specifically aiming for a realistic style for its own sake; she was trying to re-create even the smell and body heat of her subject. After all, this was a replacement activity for hunting, which uses all five senses. That was why it was so easy for her to switch over to a style of art where she got to add her own interpretation.

But still...

“That’s... kind of rough.”

“How’s that?” Elvia looked at me blankly.

“Isn’t that, like... distorting who you are, who you were meant to be, for the convenience of humans?”

“Oh. Well, I guess so, kind of. Actually, I do know werewolves who got so tired of it that they went to live in the wilderness instead.” She gave a bit of a smile, scratching her cheek. “But me, I can live with this. Drawing is fun, and I don’t think I’d last long in a survival-of-the-fittest world.”

“I see...”

To live “as nature intended” would literally mean prioritizing animal-ness. Werewolves must once have lived by the code of the strong eating the weak, but that meant that anyone who didn’t have the sharpest instincts, or anyone weakened by age, wouldn’t get to live out their natural lifespan...

Did that mean that having to bow to the needs of the humans wasn’t such a bad thing after all?

“Okay! Time for another!”

As I stood there agonizing over all this, Elvia gave herself a little pep talk. Then she grabbed her charcoal and she was at it again.



Things at the school were actually going smoothly. A little *too* smoothly, in fact.

My “otaku training center” was wildly popular with the people of the Holy Eldant Empire. You would never have guessed there had been a terrorist incident there. We could only take so many actual students, obviously, but we had more and more children of local nobles showing up to “audit.” Even some adults were begging to get in. I was starting to wonder how I would deal with it all.

With Minori-san as my assistant, I was introducing the students to Japanese entertainment and otaku products by the armload. And the students, like Myusel and even like me in my youth, seemed to be on the fast track to serious otakudom. Was it the simultaneous interpreting? Was it just because they were young? Or did they have some innate talent? I didn’t know, but they were progressing far more rapidly than I had planned on.

“Good morning, everyone!” I said as I came into the classroom. Just like I always did. But today, the way the students reacted was different from usual. Maybe there had been signs that I had simply missed.

It’s true: change doesn’t always proceed in neat stages. Eventually you reach a tipping point, and everything explodes, like an allergic reaction.

“Senseiiiiiiiiiii!”

For a second, I thought someone was yelling at me. The voice was just that loud and passionate; it hit me like a slap in the face. I took an unconscious step back.

Immediately after the voice, a student came rushing at me.

“Yikes! Wh-What the—?!”

No sooner had I entered the classroom than I was being pushed out of it. I somehow managed to stop the backward momentum before I went stumbling out the door.

There were fifty students in the room, and they were all peppering me with questions.

“When is volume 13 of *Pop Dragon* going to get here?!”

“...Huh?” I said stupidly.

They ignored my befuddled response; if anything, the questions came even harder and faster. I thought they might tear me to pieces... Words like *rioters*, *nerd tsunami*, and *the infamous East Hall on the last day of Comiket* went through my mind.

“No, wait! What about our bishoujo games?! I want the new *Hell Angel Lumière*!”

“Sensei! Is it true that there’s a lost twelfth episode to the anime version of *O-samurai Seven*?!”

“Shut up! The real issue is, in the afterword to the latest volume

of *Asobi ni kita YO!*, the author says he did a spinoff where the vice-captain is the heroine! Do you have it on your bookshelf already?!”

...And so on and so forth. They looked like news reporters trying to get a scoop, lobbing questions at me one after another. They were all shouting over each other, but the questions all came down to the same thing: “When is the new volume/issue/episode coming out?”

“Okay, hang on. Everybody just... calm down!” I said, fending them off with both hands. I guess everyone was starved for more manga and anime and games. “Just *be quiet!*” I said.

The room went silent, as if someone had flipped a switch. It was such a uniform reaction that I wondered if they had had some kind of training in it—this was a fearsomely repressed society, after all.

No, no. The more fearsome thing right now was...

“Um,” I said slowly, looking around at everyone. “I understand how you guys feel, believe me. But right now... No. I don’t have them.”

I didn’t just mean I couldn’t get them. I meant there was no new whatever. They didn’t exist. Some series were being serialized and the latest collected volume hadn’t come out yet. Some games were still in development and hadn’t been released. Before we could bring them to Eldant, they had to come out in Japan.

“Awwwww!” The students began to howl as if I had sentenced them to death. “O great evangelist! Please, have mercy—grant unto us more moe!”

Were they *praying* to me?!

It wasn’t just one student kneeling with tears in their eyes, begging piteously. A second, then a third followed. Some of them were elves and dwarves no less, and both men and women were among the supplicants. It was the strangest sight I had ever seen.

“Grant me illustrations of comely maidens!”

“Graciously throw in some bishounen, too!”

“Confer upon us a new prophecy, a new revelation!”

Okay, you guys, stop. I think you’re leaning just a little too hard into the pity thing. My classroom had transformed into a chapel for those contaminated by otaku culture, and I was apparently the great ancestor they were praying to! This was no joke!

“Wait a mi—”

“Oooohhhhhh!”

“Sensei! Senseiiiiii!”

“Oh! Oooohhhhhh!!”

This was... Well, it wasn’t like any class I had ever seen.

The students were reaching out to me like zombies. I backed up, my cheeks twitching. Then someone grabbed me by the collar...

“Okay! Today is a free-study day!” That was Minori-san, slamming

the door shut.

On the other side I could still hear the students moaning. They sounded like the damned in hell, but I ignored them as hard as I could and set off running.

I was panting by the time I stopped, not sure where I had run to. I was at some far part of the hallway when difficulty breathing finally slowed me down. I bent over, trying to collect myself, then leaned against the wall as the fatigue overcame me.

“Shinichi-kun.” Minori-san, who was standing next to me, sounded annoyed. I guess that’s a WAC for you: I had run myself ragged, but she had followed along like we were going for a walk. She wasn’t even breathing hard. “Not that I don’t understand how you feel...”

“What the heck?! What the heck was going on back there?!” But even as I asked, I thought I had a pretty good idea.

They’ve accelerated.

Things like learning Japanese or becoming acquainted with otaku culture don’t happen at a constant speed. Instead, after certain point, things increase exponentially—both the rate of learning and the rate at which consumable media is, well, consumed. My supply of product was no longer able to keep up with their evolution as otaku. On top of that...

“Um...”

Someone called out to us from nearby. Minori-san and I turned and saw a woman of ambiguous age standing there.

“Are you Kanou Shinichi-sama?”

“Er... Yes, I am.”

The woman had golden hair tied up in a ponytail and was wearing a restrained brown dress. It was obvious she was a member of the nobility long before you noticed the gigantic jewel on her finger.

“Pardon me,” I said, “but you are...?”

“I’m Rauletta, wife of Bardaressa Teodoro Pertini, who was granted noble rank by the empress. Actually, I’ve come to talk to you about my son, who goes to your school...” She looked troubled.

“You... You have?”

“Yes, I simply must. Please—” Rauletta-san’s voice broke before she could go any further. She looked completely beleaguered. Honestly, I wasn’t sure this was the time to be stopping to lend an ear to other people’s troubles, but faced with this despairing noblewoman, we could hardly rush off with a “Sorry! Busy!” We ushered Rauletta-san down the hallway.

“Perhaps you remember my son, Eduardo?” she asked as we went.

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “He’s pretty sharp—he learned to write in a hurry, anyway.”

Eduardo Teodoro Pertini. He was the boy I had seen earlier, translating the light novel in the library. He was only about fifteen years old, and his most conspicuous trait was his curly golden hair. He had picked up kana right away, as well as most of the kanji necessary for basic literacy. Extremely quick to memorize things, he drank in the information. I had him pegged as a scholar—he was very focused and very particular.

In other words, he was ideal otaku material. I would have certainly counted him among the top students at our otaku training center. But his mother...

"I'm very proud of my son," Rauletta-san said, but she had a pained expression on her face. "Or, I was. But that seems so long ago now." She had stopped in her tracks, and Minori-san and I stopped with her.

Rauletta-san pointed at a certain room. The door was ajar. A sign reading "Library" hung on the wall.

For a moment, I looked in puzzlement at Rauletta-san, who showed no sign of moving. Then I looked into the library.

We taught the kids to be quiet in the library, so it was never too noisy in there, and since it was class time now, it was practically dead. The students should have been in the classroom.

"Huh..."

And yet, I could hear a pen scratching busily inside. Deep within, I could see a young man sitting alone at a desk.

It looked a lot like what I had observed earlier. The difference was the sheer volume. Piles of dictionaries and novels towered on either side of him, and he was writing on his lambskin paper as quick as a copy machine. Yep: it was Eduardo.

There were little bags under his eyes, his face the picture of seriousness. He reminded me of a manga artist trying to make deadline. I had to admit, he didn't exactly make one think of a promising young noble.

"He talks about nothing but those books. It's as if he's possessed," his mother said, nearly weeping. "I just can't bear to see it anymore. But if I take his books, he runs away from home, and we always find him here. We've tried to get him tutors for etiquette and ballroom dancing, but he insists that his translations are the only thing that's important and won't be moved!"

She went on to tell me that she couldn't even badmouth otaku culture in front of her son. Especially seeing as how it was favored by the Empress...

I stood dumbfounded. I had students who seemed to be going through withdrawal when they couldn't get their otaku goods, and now Eduardo, who had abandoned everything else for light novel

translation. I knew what was happening. I had seen this before.

“I...”

I had only wanted to share the excitement and joy of my beloved manga and anime and games and light novels. That was all I had ever been after. And because that was all I had wanted, I had missed the most crucial thing.

The Eldant Empire—no, this whole world—would find the entertainments of my world overstimulating. I admit, I had never expected it to spread so fast, and that meant it could potentially spread *too* fast and be dangerous.

I hadn’t even considered this possibility. I had believed that anime and manga and games and light novels—really, stories of every kind—were good. Not only could they allow you to experience things that couldn’t happen in reality using the power of the imagination, not only did they help relieve fatigue and stress, but they were also a chance to gain new insight and viewpoints. They could help give life flavor, make it richer. My belief in that particular truth was unshaken.

But at the same time, there was a time and a place for everything—to say nothing of an amount. The way I brought everything in without thinking about any of that, it was almost as if I had imported powerful drugs.

There’s a limit to everything. Maybe I don’t seem qualified to say that, having spent a year as a home security guard—but then, in a way, I’m in a position to talk exactly because I’ve lived through it. And there might be other people who can talk about it in Japan, but here in the Eldant Empire, I was the only one who could or would say anything at all.

There was no precedent for this here. Nobody knew what would happen to people who lost themselves in otaku culture. And the ones who were busy enjoying themselves surely wouldn’t think that they might wind up at the worst possible end. By the time they realized what was happening, it might already be too late.

I felt my blood run cold.

“Everything I’ve done up ’til now has been...”

My knees went weak, and I thought I might collapse on the spot.



I declared the rest of the day’s classes to be self-study sessions and went home to the mansion.

Who was I to stand up in front of a class and preach at them? Eduardo might be an extreme example, but I was sure there must be plenty of other students heading down the same road. And they didn’t even know what a dangerous position they were in.

But me? Because I was an otaku and had been a shut-in, I knew. Once you get that way, it's hard to come back.

You can't do random tests for it and it's not illegal—but otaku culture is a drug. Or anyway, it sure acts like it.

Sure, even narcotics can have beneficial medicinal effects if you use them right. Unlike dictionaries or specialist texts, stories let you gain knowledge almost firsthand, and I think they can be helpful in broadening your emotional horizons. Talking about your favorite works with other people is a lot of fun, and even the most taciturn among us can get garrulous if you stumble onto a subject they're interested in. In that sense, stories can even make us more socially capable.

But all this is on the understanding that we observe certain limits. You know: "Use only as directed." I had thoughtlessly introduced a new drug to the Eldant Empire. Now the people here were captives of the stimulation, and they were starting to overdose. If this wasn't a narcotic, what was it?

"Oh ho?"

As my bodyguard Minori-san and I entered the foyer of the mansion, we found Matoba-san standing there.

His suit, the color of dead leaves, fit him exactly, yet I could never shake the sense that he didn't quite blend with his surroundings. It was more than the sight of a guy in modern Japanese salaryman garb standing in the middle of a medieval European fantasy world. In my eyes, the "bureaucrat in a business suit" look suggested a set of values that I didn't share.

Politics takes place in a realm far removed from the basic human compassion that most of us commoners are acquainted with. It would only make sense for the people who move in those circles to have unique ideas about the world.

"What seems to be the matter?" Matoba-san stood in front of us, that half-smile on his face. "Isn't school still in session?"

"Er... Yeah. Yeah, it is." I nodded, my expression stiff.

Matoba-san met my strained look with a relaxed smile of his own. *I'm just an innocent little government prole*, it seemed to say—but when I thought about it, I wondered if anyone who would deliberately project that image could actually be as harmless as they wanted to look.

"And? Is something wrong?" Matoba-san asked, finally appearing to register the expression on my face.

"Matoba-san," I said, removing my ring. I was frightened to think of having this conversation with Myusel or Brooke within earshot. Of course, Myusel had picked up quite a bit of Japanese over the last six months, so even taking the ring off was no guarantee she wouldn't understand what we were saying.

Eventually I went on. "It's true, isn't it? I really am an invader."

Matoba-san didn't respond right away. He blinked, then looked questioningly at Minori-san. She nodded, expressionless.

"I suppose it's no use hiding it any longer. Well, to all things a season." Matoba-san didn't sound especially bothered. Sort of like an old guy who got caught in a peccadillo he would have preferred to keep quiet. He definitely wasn't acting like someone who had just been revealed as an accessory to a national plot.

"I hope you'll bear one thing in mind as I tell you this," Matoba-san said, smiling to the bitter end. Now it looked like nothing more than a mask to me. "However things may appear to you, we chose the most peaceful possible way."

As a matter of fact, I knew that already. But they hadn't made that choice out of goodwill—it was just the quickest and quietest way to get what they wanted. A military invasion wouldn't have been very efficient, and the US and everyone else in the world would have been likely to notice what was going on. Then there was the concern that should any of this become public, a military invasion would be seen as contravening Article 9, and everyone involved would almost certainly be subject to both domestic and international punishment.

An economic invasion wasn't very practical, either: insofar as our economic systems differed, it would be impossible to set a meaningful exchange rate. The monetary system in the Eldant Empire might not even be as defined or stable as the one in our own world, which would only make things harder.

The only other option? Cultural invasion. Using otaku culture, no less.

"Now that I think about it," I said, glaring at Matoba-san, "if a bunch of illiterate Eldant commoners learn to read Japanese before even their own language, then that's all they'll be reading. It'll slowly distort their own system of values. It's sort of brainwashing, isn't it?"

"It is," Matoba-san said, not looking the least bit disturbed by the idea. "You consider that a problem?"

"Isn't it?!" I howled.

We weren't just talking about language here. I thought about Elvia's pictures. Wasn't that a form of brainwashing, too? Elvia had learned how to draw moe characters in no time flat; her technique was nearly perfect. If we took her back to Japan, I was sure she would have made it as a pro, no problem.

But... Then what about the hyper-realistic style she'd cultivated until now? Would the tendencies of otaku culture end up overwriting the unique traditional visual styles of this world? It's not uncommon for traditional arts to be shoved aside by whatever's popular, gradually losing pride of place and being pushed out of their own

home.

“You damnable invader!”

The words the terrorist leader of the “assembly of patriots” had spoken came back to me.

Was I—

“There’s no such thing as a person who isn’t brainwashed, Shinichi-kun,” Matoba-san said evenly. “You, me—we’ve been brainwashed with the values of modern Japan. Via television, school, magazines, newspapers, the internet.”

“Yes, but I’m Japanese!”

“Yes, you are. But does the free, undiluted culture you speak of really exist?”

I was speechless.

To a greater or lesser extent, culture is influenced by politics; that’s true enough. In the Edo Era, women were banned from appearing in kabuki stage performances in order to curtail the allegedly disruptive effects of such shows. As a result, we wound up with *yarou-kabuki*, all-male stage plays, which are now considered traditional culture. Kabuki began with Izumo Okuni—a woman—so it was only natural that women should perform in the plays. But you had plays performed by prostitutes, plays performed by groups of young boys, and the government, claiming that this was a detriment to public morals, decided to allow only older men to stage kabuki.

And was *moe* any different? Countries like the US, where it was mostly okay to show *everything* in your porn, were more honest in their own way, but also broader, less precise. We’re not exactly talking about a case of “the hidden flower being the most beautiful” here, but rather than just smiling and being as concerned about sex as you are about sports, we wrap it in layers, a sense of guilt hiding just behind the eroticism, and I think Japan’s “*moe*” is the result. The guilt, and the way you have to talk about it in these vague terms, are a result of all the public-morals laws Japan has.

Just as evolution is supposed to be urged on by each new danger, the flower of each successive generation’s culture blooms in the soil laid down by the previous one. In that sense, there really isn’t such a thing as “free” culture, totally bereft of the influences of politics and the environment.

That was all true enough. And yet...

“Matoba-san,” I said, still glaring at the bureaucrat. “I don’t want to imagine this is true, but...”

“Hm?”

“That terrorist incident...”

“Oh! No, heavens no.” Matoba-san shook his head. “We wouldn’t do such a thing. Although we did let the situation go ahead.”

“What?!”

I felt all the hair on my body stand on end. I couldn’t just let that remark pass.

Ever since the terrorist attack by the “assembly of patriots,” most criticism in the Eldant Empire of our importing otaku culture and running our school had been suppressed. Alessio and his buddies had represented the most conservative of our critics, perhaps, but because he had seen fit to use violence, all those who objected to Japanese culture now risked being considered co-conspirators—traitors to their country, even.

That was part of why things were going so well for our school.

And now that I thought about it... Wasn’t the timing of all of it just a little too convenient? That was what had prompted my question. I couldn’t believe they would really...

“I’d appreciate if you could keep calm,” Matoba-san said. “It’s not as if we knew for certain. Our information-gathering abilities here don’t amount to much. We simply had an inkling. Our own world provides plenty of examples showing that there will always be those who resist cultural invasion.”

I waited a long time before I answered. “Why didn’t you warn the Eldant Empire, then?”

“If we’d done that, they would have dealt with everything themselves, wouldn’t they?” He smiled as if wondering how I could ask such a ridiculous question. “That incident established that we can and do intervene in Eldant’s domestic matters. With that precedent in place, it will be easier to expand the JSDF’s activities and operations in the future.”

I stood in shocked silence. Even I hadn’t imagined they were thinking that far ahead, but it made sense.

“This country has a superb military of its own,” Matoba-san said. “But strictly speaking, they have nothing akin to what we would call a police force in our world. Naturally, the army will capture criminals and chase away bandits if they’re specifically requested to do so, but they remain principally a military force. If and when a war breaks out, they’ll have no more time to attend to the petty concerns of the citizens, and a wave of violence and looting will be the result.”

If and when a war breaks out...? Wasn’t the Eldant Empire already constantly engaged in border skirmishes with the neighboring nations? That could only mean...

“That’s where we come in. We offer to bring over police patrol officers. The Eldant side, seeking any port in the storm of war, will accept. And when our officers’ duties become official, the Japanese

government will have that much more say in how things are done here.”

I was speechless. This was more than taking advantage of your opponent’s weakness—this was deliberately *creating* a weakness.

“H-Have you left no sense of decency, sir?!” I demanded.

“I confess, it hurts me to hear that,” Matoba-san said, the arch of his eyebrows falling slightly. “But this decision comes from over my head.”

“Over your head?! Oooh! This is why I hate bureaucrats!”

“All our hands are tied.” Matoba-san shrugged. “And yet you’ve deduced all this, but missed the real point.”

“Huh...?”

I thought I saw something dark pass over Matoba-san’s otherwise relaxed countenance, and it spooked me. He wasn’t specifically trying to provoke me—but that made it all the more frightening, the way he talked about the bizarre as if it were ordinary.

“You understand that these are state secrets, yes?” he said. “I believe we talked about that.”

I didn’t say anything.

“What I’m trying to say is, in the interest of preserving secrecy, any members of our staff who tried to interfere with the execution of our plans would almost certainly be... dealt with.”

“‘Dealt with’?”

He couldn’t mean...

“Me. PFC Koganuma. And you, Shinichi-kun. If those above me decide that you lack the qualifications to be our pioneer here, you could well find that you disappear. Hadn’t you realized?” Chewing over his words, never quite enunciating, Matoba-san said, “Why do you think we brought someone like you—someone incapable of doing either great good or great harm—onto a project of utmost national secrecy?”

He looked at me; I thought I saw pity in his eyes. It was the same look that self-proclaimed “average people” always give otaku. The pride of the majority over against a minority.

“Was it because of your deep knowledge of otaku culture? Was it because we thought you would make such an excellent evangelist? Surely not. As I told you, the whole idea of using two-dimensional works as the primary vector of cultural infection was only ever an experiment to the people in charge. One that might go on only until they found a more effective method.”

Yes... Yes, I remembered hearing that. But still...

“Do you know why I chose you?” Matoba-san asked. “You fit the brief I was given by my superiors: someone who could be erased wholesale from our world without anyone really noticing.”

He spoke so calmly, but I felt as if I had been punched in the gut.

Chapter Four: The Melancholy of an Invader

I sighed to myself.

I was standing in Eldant Castle.

It was the day for me to visit the royal residence, as I did once every three days, but to be perfectly honest, I hadn't wanted to come out of my room. It was the first time I had felt this way in a long time—in fact, it was the very first time I'd felt this way since coming to the Eldant Empire.

Normally, I would go to the school immediately after my visit to the castle, but today I just couldn't summon the enthusiasm. Who knew there were days when teachers didn't want to go to school, either? I thought back on my high school instructors with a twinge of sympathy.

The attempt at recollection didn't go well.

Their faces were already all but lost to me in the mists of memory. Factoring in the year I'd been a shut-in, I hadn't seen them for eighteen months now, so it was no surprise that I couldn't remember them. My classmates, too, seemed oddly unreal to me, like characters in a story.

Maybe it just went to show how important this half a year in the Eldant Empire had been to me. It loomed so large in my mind that that other world—the “real” one—seemed hazy by comparison.

And yet, standing there in the castle courtyard with morning light streaming around me, I felt deeply weary. Since the conversation with Matoba-san, I had been doing my best to do some thinking. I had tried questioning Minori-san, too, and although it could take a little cajoling, she was mostly pretty open about things—maybe she figured it was too late to keep secrets now.

It turned out, of course, that the Japanese government had always planned to invade this world, this place to which they were connected by a hyperspace wormhole. The first sniff they got of this “virgin land” smelled to them like profit. A veritable treasure trove.

Take, for example, agrobiolgy, which has been such a topic of discussion lately. Basically, people realized that the bacteria and other plant and animal life-forms unique to specific geographical areas could help make a lot of money depending on how you used them. They could be good for farming, medicine, industry, and even military

applications. As biotechnology developed, people started looking for more and more profitable genetic data, the grim hand of research reaching from the tops of the mountains to the bottoms of the seas.

But as the riches these agrobiological resources could generate became clearer and clearer, the people who owned the land where those resources were found, to say nothing of the countries where that land was located, sought to assert ownership over those resources—right down to the genetic data that could be gathered from them. The days of digging through the earth, hoping to find some new bacteria, were coming to an end.

And just as the window was closing, what should appear but this world? The government officials were probably dancing for joy. The mere thought of what agrobiological resources might exist in a world like this, one totally separated from our own, was dizzying. It could be on the order of tens of thousands—it could be millions, or billions! And there was no one here who was trying to claim ownership of those resources—yet.

They were there for the taking.

Of course, agrobiology was hardly the only precedent here. Think of the Europeans buying the island of Manhattan from the natives for a swindler's price. On the Eldant side of the hyperspace tunnel we were dealing with an effectively medieval level of cultural development, which made it easy to take advantage of the other party's ignorance. For example, in a world without electricity, rare-earth metals were just rocks and dirt. (That was, of course, providing this world actually had any resources like that.)

Anyway.

The simplest way to bring this world, or at least the Eldant Empire, under Japanese control would be a military invasion. That, however, would have demanded deploying the JSDF.

The real problem wasn't legal qualms about Article 9 or whatever. It was that a military invasion would require a good deal of weaponry and manpower to be sent over here, and the wormhole was an awfully tight fit. Plus, if the government wasn't careful, other countries would be apt to smell something fishy. America and China in particular weren't likely to let such a thing pass unnoticed.

Japan wasn't exactly the world's 500-pound gorilla. Once other governments got wind of what was going on, there was a good chance Japan's priority and resource rights would be taken away. I mean, we're talking about countries like America, which for all its fulminating about national autonomy was willing to throw its weight around in the Middle East to make sure its oil supplies were secure. They would find some reason to intervene here, too.

On top of that, even if the JSDF managed to get over here

secretly, there remained the question of whether they could actually win. Sure, we've got movies like *G.I. Samurai*, but the truth is, we couldn't be certain that modern military equipment would have the advantage. Modern military history provides more examples of numbers overcoming a technologically superior force than I could name.

Then there was the little fact that people in this world could use magic. The Japanese side hadn't yet figured out what principal this magic operated on. There was always a certain possibility that the actual laws of physics were different in the Eldant Empire than they were in Japan, and we simply hadn't realized it yet. The JSDF's weapons involved a lot of electricity and sheer physical mass, so in a world that had different laws of physics, weapons might malfunction in exciting new ways, right when we least wanted them to.

For what it was worth, the armored personnel carrier seemed to be running smoothly—but I supposed the engineers would be left shaking their heads if anyone tried to tell them it was really fire sprites doing the work over here.

Another thing we didn't know was how powerful military magic was around here. You couldn't discount the possibility that someone would just shout "Abracadabra!" and turn the whole army into frogs.

In light of all this, the Japanese government hit on a better plan: cultural invasion.

Once upon a time, Christian missionaries—along with narcotics—were used as the tip of the spear wherever there was to be an invasion.

Religion is a powerful brainwashing device. Even if the founders and their immediate disciples didn't intend it—in fact, probably never imagined their teachings being used that way—a religion's power to bind people together can become the basis for large-scale rebellions and wars, as history teaches. You can use it to destroy an enemy country from the inside without ever firing a shot.

At the moment, though, Japan had no really "addictive" religion. Buddhism and Shinto have become a sort of transparent part of people's lives precisely by softening their own most powerful characteristics—and on the other end of the spectrum, the various "new religions," which undoubtedly do have an "addictive" quality, would probably be downright dangerous if deployed by the government. One wrong move, and Japan could have a hostile country right next door with nothing but a hyperspace portal for a border.

So the question arose: was there something similar to drugs or religion, but easier to control?

As it happened, otaku culture fit the bill. And the idiot otaku who

wandered right into the government's clutches was... me.

"Dammit..."

This whole situation was like a rock that had started to roll down a hill. Even if I quit, they would just bring in the next oblivious nerd—and maybe it would be someone without any compunctions about invading another world.

That meant there wasn't much I could do to thwart the plans I was now a part of. I would simply be "dealt with," as Matoba-san had put it.

What to do, what to do?

Should I pretend I hadn't noticed anything? Yes, this was an invasion, but not exactly the way they did it back in the Middle Ages. The Japanese government didn't intend to conquer the Eldant Empire, massacre its people, and make slaves of the survivors or anything wildly inhuman like that.

Well, wait... Didn't they?

I highly doubted that the Japanese government would endorse traditional slavery, but there was no question that a system of exploitation would emerge. It would cause the gap between rich and poor to widen, further exacerbating the Eldant Empire's already class-conscious society: the people who were already starving would starve worse, while the small minority that was the ruling class would tighten their grip. You don't even have to look as far as our—ahem—neighbor to the north. The pattern seemed likely to be the same no matter what world you were in.

I stood there, not making a sound. I felt like I was in some kind of nightmare, one of those pain-in-the-ass ones that refuses to end. I rubbed my eyes, then stared at my palms. But there was no escaping it: I wasn't going to wake up, because this nightmare was my reality.

As I was thinking these gloomy thoughts, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up with a start to see a handsome, silver-haired guy frowning at me. It was the knight, Garius. An important young mover and shaker in the Eldant Empire, he was a minister as well as a knight.

"How very melancholy you look," he said. "What troubles you, Shinichi?"

"Oh, uh, you know. Just things..." I said evasively. I was definitely not about to explain to him of all people that I was among the first elements of an invasion intended to gain a foothold in his world.

I looked at the ground, feeling too sick to meet his eyes. If our gazes met, I was sure he would suspect me—but I didn't have much choice.

"Hm?" he murmured.

Despite the fact that I was staring at my feet, I could sense that

Garius was looking at me doubtfully. I hoped he would be content to leave it at that and go away, but if that were the case, he wouldn't have started talking to me to begin with.

The air was full of the warm sunlight of early afternoon. You could tell a ruler lived here at Eldant Castle, because everything beyond the railing of the marble terrace we were on looked like a giant nature reserve. I leaned against the railing, an oppressive feeling settling over me. Still I didn't speak.

I peeked back over my shoulder at the terrace behind me. A short distance away there was a table, the legs fashioned to look like cat's paws, laden with silver trays bearing bite-sized cakes. Petralka was sitting there, enjoying her afternoon tea. Myusel and Minori-san were with her, and Minori-san and Petralka were trying to talk down Myusel, who was insisting on serving them.

The scene was almost peaceful enough to bring a smile to my face. And yet, sitting there together were the invader and the invaded. And the people who were being invaded didn't even know it yet. If Petralka or Myusel knew the truth—knew what the Japanese government was really planning—what would they think? The sight of their little tea party looked so precarious to me, like a house built on sand.

"Shinichi?" The voice that brought me back to reality was again that of Garius, who was still standing in front of me. He wasn't looking at me, though. He had his eyes on Petralka and the others just like I did.

"I believe you spoke to me once of the 'knightly virtues,'" he said.

"Huh? Oh... Yeah." That conversation seemed so long ago now; his reference brought me up short. Thinking back on it, I realized how arrogant I must have sounded—me, who was nothing more than an agent of some invaders.

"I think it could be, Shinichi, that this culture you're bringing us will undermine our own long-standing traditions."

I almost choked, but Garius either didn't mind or didn't notice, because he went right on.

"I am a knight of the Eldant Empire; myself and others all esteem me as such. I know the knight's principles, and... Well, I believed I was living them. But I found the knights depicted in the manga you brought to be shocking. To be precise, I suppose I should say the knights in the manga Her Highness read aloud to me. 'This is what it means to be a knight,' she said. Tell me... is that truly how knights in your country are?"

"Well, uh..."

The truth was, things like the knightly virtues and bushido were post-hoc creations, developed in times of peace, to help take ruffians

whose talents were only useful in war and turn them into members of a less violent society. These codes were, in their own way, tools of political brainwashing, not anything born of necessity...

"I was angry, at first," Garius said. "I felt you were dismissing knighthood as it had been passed down to us through the generations. I suppose that's still true." He didn't sound as upset as his words suggested. "But of late, I sometimes feel... Let's say it feels as if I've been defeated."

"Wha...?"

A lot of fantasy stories involving knights are morality plays. It may seem obvious, but we see them defeating the strong and defending the weak, and it looks heroic to us. We hold them up as ideals, people who fight for what they believe in even when it seems ridiculous to do so. What did Garius, who was a real, actual knight, make of that?

And what did he mean by *defeated*? Did he feel he had lost to the idealized image of a knight from some other world? If that was true, he must have found it immensely embarrassing.

I remained silent; Garius made a little motion with his chin.

"In all my life, I've never seen anything quite like that," he said. He was indicating Petralka, sitting happily in the sun. Myusel, sitting across from her, was smiling kindly, and Minori-san seemed to be enjoying herself, too. There were maids besides Myusel there to serve—but even they, standing against the wall, seemed somehow happy, swept up in the pleasant atmosphere.

"Her Majesty—Petralka..." Garius said to me, almost whispering. "She was so young when her parents died. Politics... Everyone poisoned everyone else in a dispute over the succession, if you can believe it. The previous Majesty was deeply distraught, passing from grief just a year later. That's how Petralka ended up on the throne at such a young age."

I couldn't say anything. For someone to be an empress when she was still practically young enough to be called a child—I knew there had to be some kind of story there, but even I hadn't realized...

Wait. Hold on a second.

If they were disputing the succession, that meant...

"Yes," Garius said with a grim smile, as if he had read my thoughts. "The ones who poisoned Petralka's parents were my own parents."

The shock must have been clear on my face.

"Petralka inherited the throne because—well, of course, she's ostensibly first in line for the succession. The reality is, though, that it was the product of a compromise between the factions who supported the First Prince and the Second Prince, in order that they might not

simply destroy each other. Petralka could be put forth as putative empress, with myself as regent, and both factions could continue to exist.”

“But that would mean...”

That would mean Petralka was a puppet ruler, no more than an ornament on the throne.

“Of course, Petralka herself is aware of that much. That’s precisely why she works so hard to appear suitably imperial. She knows that her own parents, as well as her aunt and uncle, died by poison, and she’s quite keen that such a thing not happen again. So she does her duty as empress with as much fanfare as she can muster. At the same time, it appears she’s been quite considerate toward me, as well.”

“Petralka did all that...?”

I hadn’t had any idea of the sort of position she was in. Now that I thought about it, though, it struck me that a true child empress would be unusual; that her presence pointed to some covert structure of power.

“Thus it was only after our parents’ deaths that I ever saw my cousin, Petralka, smile in a way befitting a girl of her age.”

I was speechless. I didn’t know what exactly it looked like to Garius, but he smiled, a bit sadly.

“Petralka has had favorite ministers, but no one she could rightly call a friend. Someone and something has finally arrived that she can truly admit into her heart. That is you, and the culture you’ve brought.”

I never expected him to say it so frankly.

Without any pretense, he said, “I thank you.”

Could it be... Could it be that even this handsome knight had days that he simply wanted to be a friendly older cousin for Petralka?

“But...” I began, but as I expected, I couldn’t bring myself to go further.

But that was just... coincidence.

The otaku culture I’d brought—it was supposed to be a tool of invasion.

“I don’t know precisely what worries you, Shinichi,” Garius said, “but you may hold your head high. So far from being as weak as I took you for, you have saved Her Majesty.”

Then he turned and began to walk away, toward the table where the girls were having tea; he no doubt intended to join the conversation. As I watched him go—as you might guess—all I could do was sigh.

Hold my head high? As if.

Minori-san stood up on the pretext of offering Garius her seat and came up to me. She was glancing back and forth between me and

Garius, smirking.

“Shinichi-kun,” she whispered in my ear as she came up beside me. “You two were looking awfully friendly. I don’t think anyone could have gotten between you if they’d wanted to.”

She sounded like a schoolgirl trying to wheedle some sweet little love story out of her classmate.

“No we weren’t! Yes they could have!” I said, my voice on the edge of a shout. “This whole BL, yaoi, whatever... *thing* that you’re hoping for, it’s not going to happen!”

“Oooh. Methinks he doth protest too much!” she said.

This woman...

“Minori-san,” I said, suddenly changing my tone. “If... If I said I wanted to quit, what would happen?”

It took a moment for her to respond.

“At the very least... I think you’d better not say anything like that in front of Bureau Chief Matoba.” She was looking at me very seriously. “Unfortunately, you already know what you are and what you’re here for. And I’m pretty sure your beloved manga and anime and light novels have given you an idea of what governments do with people who know too much.”

“That’s... That’s true.” I knew, all right. That was why I was so damn depressed.

At that exact moment—you couldn’t have scripted it better—we heard Petralka talking.

“Mm. Otaku culture is quite a good thing. It broadens one’s views and enlarges one’s world! I believe we shall make it part of the foundational curriculum for noble education going forward. Perhaps we can gradually give the commoners opportunities to study it as well. In fact, I believe our political and judiciary systems could benefit from the philosophies set forth in otaku culture—”

“No! You can’t!” I shouted, almost reflexively.

That killed the mood on the terrace. I had shattered the peace that had reigned until just a moment ago. Now there was an unsettling tension in the air instead.

Petralka and Myusel were both wide-eyed with surprise, Garius was looking at me questioningly, and the maids seemed downright terrified.

“Why not?” Petralka asked, knitting her brow. “Is there some problem? Shinichi, what moves you to say such a thing?”

I didn’t answer. How could I possibly?

“Shinichi... are you not the evangelist of otaku culture?”

“Well...”

I had been convinced I was simply bringing otaku culture to this world. Just anime and manga and light novels and games. Nothing

more than that, nothing more meaningful than that. As much as I, an otaku myself, loved all those things, I had mistaken their power.

If you take too much medicine, it can be poisonous. If somebody takes medicine they're not used to, that can be poisonous, too. To a place with an underdeveloped entertainment culture like the Eldant Empire, otaku culture turned out to be far more insidious than I had realized, and it was spreading fast. It was like a bioweapon, and the contagion was on the move. This was a cultural "outbreak."

Changes as sudden and dramatic as this, of course, are bound to create friction. Some of them might lead to good things, like the friendship between Petralka and Myusel. There was no question of that. But at the same time, there was just as much possibility that they would create problems.

Destruction was, after all, destruction. Cracks would appear in traditional systems and ideals, and in the attempt to maintain internal consistency, logic would eventually fail. In an extreme scenario, abruptly introducing otaku culture, created as it was in a world of freedom and equality, to a socially stratified empire could practically inspire a rebellion against the state.

There are plenty of examples where the internet spread in countries in which the government formerly kept a tight leash on information, the state found it was no longer able to repress the populace, and the system crumbled.

What if something similar occurred in the Eldant Empire? What would happen to Petralka? The existing social system would turn to rubble. Power would be held in name only, institutions no longer able to function. Rebellion would break out, and the nation wouldn't be able to continue under its current legal system.

Wasn't that exactly what the Japanese government wanted?

Or was I overthinking it? Was all this just an ugly flight of fancy?

I would be so, so happy if it were.

"Shinichi?" Petralka was looking at me with concern. But I didn't have it in me to answer.

How much of what I was doing was invasion, and how much was enlightenment?

Was it really right to bring in ideas like freedom and equality?

I groaned, lost in a philosophical maze I saw no way out of.



A weary voice came from the other side of the door: "I was afraid he might end up like this one day."

Maybe they were deliberately speaking loudly enough for me to hear them. Then again, you could hear what was going on from pretty

much anywhere in the house, despite the overall high quality of the construction. I didn't know if it was a problem with architectural technology or what, but most buildings in the Eldant Empire seemed to have poor sealing and soundproofing.

Regardless. I was slumped down, leaning my back against the door to my office. In a way, it was strangely familiar—this was how I had spent much of my time as a home security guard.

The door was locked, but there was a chance that Myusel or Brooke had matching keys, so I had tied the doorknob securely to one of the candleholders on the wall with a piece of string. I guess if Minori-san or someone got really serious, it would still be easy enough to break in.

“As soon as he gets home, he locks himself in that room...”

It was Myusel, sounding worried. I was happy to know that she was concerned for me, but the way I was feeling right then, even that considerateness felt like a burden.

“What in the world is wrong with the master...?”

“Search me,” Minori-san said.

Obviously, she couldn't divulge what she knew. What was she going to do, just tell Myusel that I was part of the first wave of an invasion and I was currently feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of what I had done?

A second later, I picked up the tapping of shoes coming closer.

“Bureau Chief Matoba,” Minori-san said, helpfully informing me of the shoes' owner.

Matoba Jinzaburou, head of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau—and the one responsible for the current plan of cultural invasion.

“It seems things aren't going well,” I heard Matoba-san say. He sounded painfully calm, as if none of this really concerned him.

“I'm sorry, Myusel, but could you leave us alone for a while?” Minori-san asked. I heard Myusel reply “Yes, ma'am,” and then the sound of her footsteps growing distant. It sounded like only Minori-san and Matoba-san were left outside my room.

“This is not a good thing,” Matoba-san said.

“I'm—I'm not sure it's really that big a deal...” Minori-san said, trying to cover for me. “Emotional volatility is pretty common in boys his age.”

“That might have held water before,” Matoba-san said with a sigh, “but at this point, I doubt the higher-ups will brook any delay in their plans. After all our efforts, we've managed to produce a small group of people addicted to otaku culture. A strong early result. Next, one would expect us to secure the foothold we have and then expand from there.”

In other words, to make more addicts—scads of them.

The spread of otaku culture was going more smoothly than we could have dreamed, and I got the distinct impression that the Japanese government was feeling pretty good about it. We had been granted an increased budget, whatever expensive supplies we wanted. That included a projector for showing anime—the latest model—to say nothing of some computers.

But of course, if they were throwing that much money at us, it meant they expected us to do something with it. They wanted measurable results. Something they could assign a number to, proof that the plan was working.

“Some have suggested that if he won’t help us, he be replaced with someone else.” I caught the threatening undertone in Matoba-san’s seemingly casual remark. I knew all too well that if they had to replace me, it wasn’t going to be with a *Sorry for the trouble, have a good life*. No, they would have something else in mind...

“Wait just a second!” Minori-san said, sounding a bit shaken. “The present situation is... It’s part of Kanou Shinichi’s work. A function of his talent, you might say.”

Matoba-san didn’t answer. On the other side of the door, I laughed noiselessly.

Talent, huh?

My talent as an otaku. My talent for invading other worlds. My talent for destroying culture.

The truth was..... I was the worst otaku ever.

“If you’re absolutely certain that someone else could do his job as well as he does, then fine. But sir, you should know as well as anyone that you can’t just change him out for some other random nerd! He’s gained the trust of the Eldant Empire!”

Apparently Minori-san was really committed to protecting me. Yet at that moment, it actually didn’t make me happy. I couldn’t shake this feeling that even Minori-san had been duped.

“If they try to hurry things too much, it’ll only end up causing everything we’ve done to go to waste. I think he could use some time to... to rest, or recuperate, or whatever you want to call it. So—”

“Koganuma-kun,” Matoba-san said, wresting control of the conversation back from Minori-san. “That decision is for my superiors to make.”

Silence. Even from the other side of the door, I could tell Minori-san was lost for words.

Matoba-san, however, wasn’t. He went on calmly: “I hope you won’t misunderstand.”

“Misunderstand what, sir?” Minori-san asked in a barbed tone. She was by definition on the government’s side, but as an otaku

herself, she couldn't have been entirely happy about what the government was trying to do.

"Please realize, I'm not speaking as the chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau here. This is my own personal assessment," Matoba-san began. "But despite everything that's happened, I still like the boy. As such, I would be glad if he continued to serve as the general manager of Amutech—making his best effort in the position, of course."

Yeah? And why was that? Why in the hell would I believe that now?

For that matter, even if Matoba-san was telling the truth—so what?

"I imagine you can hear me, Kanou Shinichi-kun," Matoba-san called through the door. "You haven't much time. Unlike your honored parents, the people over my head are neither patient nor especially merciful. I promise you they won't abide a shut-in for very long. We're not asking you to kill anyone, are we? You only need to keep on spreading otaku culture. That's all."

I didn't answer. I didn't want to hear another word from Matoba-san—I grabbed a nearby blanket and tossed it over my head.



There was one very simple, very obvious matter I had to attend to.

No matter how much one might want to shut himself away in his room, it just isn't possible to live one's *entire* life there. Myusel was kind enough to set my food outside my door, but of course, what goes in, uh, must come out—and even I couldn't bring myself to do *that* in my room. Heck, I didn't even have a plastic bottle.

That was how I found myself checking that neither Minori-san nor Matoba-san was outside my room, then creeping out, walking gingerly to quiet my footsteps. It was past midnight already, and the house was wreathed in silence. I moved down the stairs, heading for the first-floor toilet.

But then I stopped. A giant shape loomed up out of the darkness. It was in a lump on the floor, a surface I generally expected to be flat. Hidden by the blackness of night, it was really pretty creepy.

"...Brooke." I sighed and called out to the lolling lizardman. "Please don't sleep on the floor in the dark. Someone's gonna step on you."

"V'ry... sorry, sir... Please, don't... don't hesitate t' step on me."

Coming from a young woman, those words might make me wonder if she had some very strange preferences, but coming from Brooke—really, here in Eldant as a whole—I knew they meant

something different.

“Hey... Brooke.” I crouched down, calling his name again. “You say getting beaten is just an occupational hazard, but doesn’t that ever bother you?”

No matter how tough they might be, I was sure no one liked getting smacked around as a matter of course.

Brooke heaved himself up, crossing his arms and looking a bit at a loss. “Ahh... ’Fraid I don’t understand much what you’re talkin’ about, sir.” After a second, he went on. “Lizardmen don’t... rank very high.... in any country.”

“Huh. Now that you mention it, I guess you’re right.”

I had spotted some lizardman kids at the training grounds, but there were none enrolled at my school. Elves and dwarves might have been lower on the totem pole than humans, but that was in terms of average treatment as an entire race. There were definitely elves and dwarves in this country who had managed to work their way up and earn a fair amount of respect, and a lot of them were sending their kids to our school.

Lizardmen, on the other hand, would find there was only so far they could go, even if they tried to make their own way in the world. Their fundamental position was so low, in fact, that even if one of them achieved a degree of success, they still couldn’t send their kids to the school.

“Even in the... ‘otaku goods’ you’ve brought us, Master... lizardmen... are the villains, oft as not.”

“Huh? Oh... Yeah. I guess... I guess you’re right...”

Maybe it had something to do with their mean looks, but lizardmen tended to be the most recognizable members of the bad guys’ gangs.

Feeling a little sick, I stopped talking. The corners of Brooke’s mouth rose ever so slightly. I knew it was a smile, but it was still a little spooky.

“You’re a most unique person, Master,” he said after a moment.

“I—I am?”

“I don’t mean t’ sound like I’m... complaining, sir. Not at all. I grant maybe... we lizards aren’t best pleased... t’ be treated so ill. But it’s not... like we don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Perhaps you didn’t know, Master... once, long ago... the lizardmen used t’ be the... the mortal enemies of humankind.”

“Wait, they were?!”

Brooke briefly recounted the history of his race, to my mounting astonishment. Unlike the other races, the lizardmen were reptiles—meaning they were cold-blooded; they were even born from eggs.

They also didn't feel pain as keenly as the other races, and had big, powerful bodies to boot.

Maybe it only made sense that these biological differences would have caused the lizards to produce a fundamentally different set of values from the warm-blooded races—the soft-skinned humans, elves, dwarves, and werewolves. Lizardman morality wasn't completely different from the human equivalent, but it was definitely distinct.

For one thing, the lizardmen liked killing.

They had serious inborn offensive capabilities, and they took joy in attacking and killing things. For them, it wasn't just about catching their next meal. Big group hunts were a major part of their culture and indeed something they did for fun.

"I see," I said. "Like the way humans go hunting or fishing..."

Hunting in modern Japan—not all of it, necessarily, but a certain percentage—is basically a hobby for the hunters, not an absolute necessity for survival. You end up with people who argue that killing other living things for your own enjoyment is cruel, and others who say it's cultural and should be preserved.

Anyway.

When hunting is a matter of culture and interest, it naturally becomes more complex and sophisticated. In lizardman culture, stronger opponents were preferred. Ideally, prey at least as intelligent as themselves, who could use weapons and tools. In other words, elves, dwarves, werewolves—and humans.

They especially liked to hunt that last race. Humans were slower than werewolves, weaker than dwarves, and less magically adept than elves—individually, they were the weakest race of all.

For many long years, the lizardmen enjoyed their human hunts.

Precisely because humans are so weak alone, however, they form groups, using the abilities they do have to the fullest. When it comes to battle, humans get together, using complex strategies and tactics to elevate their collective fighting abilities far beyond what any one of them could do alone. When these advanced human organizations—in other words, nations—collided with the lizards' large-scale hunts, a huge interracial war broke out.

And who came out on top in that conflict? Take a guess.

The cold-blooded lizardmen weren't well-suited to a long war. They lost battle after battle—in winter, when they were too cold to move readily; in early morning and late evening, when their mobility was at its lowest. Too many lost battles amounted to a lost war, and they were absorbed into human society as slaves, or so Brooke told me.

"Slaves...?" I could only goggle.

Scratching the back of his head in embarrassment, Brooke said,

“After centuries... of pillage and... looting, what else... would they do? Anyway... we may have loved blood, but now we... we don’t quite have the edge we used to. Our modern position... has taught us the virtues of... living peacefully... And so I’m... quite satisfied with things as they are.”

“You... You are?”

Even as I asked, I thought back to the conversation Elvia and I had had earlier. There were those who had been forced to change their traditional ways of life in order to be a part of human society, but that didn’t mean their lives now were nothing but tragedy, crying out to be changed—at least, apparently.

“Master.” Brooke was whispering and looking from side to side as if he wanted to make sure no one was there. “This is something I could only say to you, but... as luck would have it... I’ve received word from... the Tribal Council... that some of our kin, ones who live... apart from human society... go on raids, like in... the old days...”

I didn’t answer. Elvia had said something much the same. I suspected there were similar enclaves of elves and dwarves, as well.

“Even we lizards aren’t... all carved from a single stone... Some aren’t content with our present station... and choose to live as we did before... Just a few. But because we already know... life with the humans... the Tribal Council considered what those lizards... were doing, and declared... that we would abide our current situation...”

I still didn’t say anything. Had they found it a painful decision to make? Or were they simply running away? I didn’t know. But...

“Right, then... I’m going t’ make a li’l fire outside... and get some sleep... G’night, sir...”

“Yeah... Sure. Good night.”

I watched Brooke shuffle away with his head down. There was a heaviness in my heart. Even after I came back from using the toilet, it still hadn’t gone away.

Something was nagging at me. I couldn’t put it into words, but I felt like I had brushed up against something I should grab onto. As if in an effort to settle what exactly it was, I headed back, not to my own room, but to where Elvia was staying.

“Elvia,” I called quietly.

When I came in, there she was, hunched over her art books as always, her hands working silently but furiously. This time, though, I was glad to see that she seemed to notice me come in right away. “Shinichi-sama,” she said. Her tail wagged a little, but she didn’t look back at me.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I just can’t seem to get this right. Do I not have the right supplies or something?”

This time she looked at me, indicating a book of illustrations lying in front of her. It was open to a page entitled “Coloring with Photoshop.”

“Oh... Well, uh, I won’t say it’s impossible to get colors like that using a brush, but it’s pretty darn hard.” I smiled apologetically. “I guess you could get a similar effect with an airbrush, but they did those colors using a computer.”

“What’s an... *ayr-brush*? And a *com-pyoo-ter*?” She cocked her head, confused by these new words.

Our magic rings essentially allowed us to communicate telepathically, but there was one fundamental problem: if the other person had no concept corresponding to a word you used, the ring wouldn’t be able to translate it; it would simply come across as a floating piece of vocabulary.

Computers were a concept that hadn’t existed in this world until I had brought some over, and airbrushes still didn’t. Elvia, meanwhile, had spent all her time with her books and, as far as I could tell, hadn’t even touched the computer we had installed in the mansion.

So I could use the word, but she didn’t know it; and she could look at the book, but she didn’t understand what she was seeing.

“It’s—you know the box on the wall in my office? It lets you create illustrations digitally, connect to the net—well, it would, if we had the net.”

No sooner had I said this than something which had been only a vague conception in the back of my mind took on a concrete form.

Yes. Net. Internet!

Think... China, for example. There’s a country that gives the impression of having absolute control over the flow of information, but it isn’t actually an airtight system. The internet itself is too amorphous and huge for them to be watching every corner of it; there has to be a way out somewhere.

As a result, as the internet became more widespread in China, people started to gain access to information that they hadn’t had before. I don’t think the fundamental nature of the Chinese state or people changed because of that—there are still plenty of people who believe only what the government tells them, just as there have always been; and for every person who hates Japan, there’s probably someone who decided Japan was all right.

But either way, it was their own free choice.

“So that’s it...”

I thought I saw the first ray of light piercing my personal darkness.



I went back to my office and tried to organize my thoughts.

A ray of light was nothing more than that. In order to escape the darkness, you had to walk toward it, one step after another.

I tapped away on my keyboard. My thoughts appeared on the screen of my PC—I was just making a list, but even so, taking some vague ideas I'd had and trying to put them into words made them a lot more concrete.

You know, I thought I remembered my light novel-author dad saying something similar once. While it was all in his head, he told me, it was just fantasy. And as long as you did nothing but mull over those ideas in your mind, you would never escape the realm of fantasy. Your thoughts only took on form when you entrusted them to some kind of tool that would communicate them to others, be it words or art or music. It didn't matter if you were just writing a note or shooting the breeze—getting an idea out of your own brain and into the world was the true first step to creating something.

What was I trying to create?

It was...

"Um... Master...?"

The trembling voice that called out to me was not very loud, but I had been so focused on my typing that it took me by surprise. I jumped a little and looked back at the door to the room.

"Myusel...?"

It was awfully late already. Never mind Elvia, whose power switch seemed to be permanently on, and Brooke, with whom it was always hard to tell if he was awake or asleep. I had been sure Myusel would be sleeping by now.

"You're still up?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Um... May I come in?"

Her questions always sounded so tentative. I thought about it for a second, then said, "Sure."

I had spent the last several days cooped up and isolated, not wanting to see anyone—but to tell the truth, the person I was most afraid of seeing was Myusel.

It wasn't as if I had come to hate her or anything like that. I was just... really scared, because it was so painful to see her face. Still, though...

"Thank you, sir," she said, and came into the room.

Not only was she up late at night, but she was carrying a tray with a pot of tea and a cup on top of it.

"Is that...?" I asked, staring wide-eyed at the tea set.

We didn't have a water heater in this mansion, and we definitely didn't have one of those fancy electric tea kettles that keeps the water hot for you. No gas burners, no induction cooktop. You couldn't make

tea on a whim; the water just wouldn't be there. Whether you used a small stove or summoned fire sprites with magic, you would have to get a fire going and heat the water yourself—not a quick or easy process.

That meant Myusel hadn't just passed by my room, seen the light leaking out, and decided she'd make me a quick cup of tea. No. She must have been constantly making sure we had plenty of hot water, gotten all the tea supplies ready, and then gone by my room several times. She had been waiting for me, so I could come out at any time and tea would be waiting.



My chest tightened with regret; I felt terrible for putting her to the trouble.

“...I’m sorry,” I said.

“Wha? S-Sorry for what?” she asked, blinking.

She was understandably not sure why I was apologizing to her. Given her personality, it only made sense. I felt too bad to make direct eye contact, but scratching my cheek, I said, “Well, you know, uh... for worrying you like that.”

“Oh... Yes, sir.” She nodded quite candidly, but then she seemed to realize what she was doing and quickly shook her head instead. “Er, I—I mean, it’s my job as a maid to take your physical and emotional needs into consideration, Master. You c-certainly don’t need to apologize to me...”

As far as it went, she was right. But I was still happy that she cared that much about me, and I wanted to express that somehow.

“Right,” I said. I thought for a few seconds, then started again. It was a little bit embarrassing to say all this directly, but...

“Thanks. It makes me happy. Maybe that works?”

“Yes, sir!” Myusel said after a very long pause. Her cheeks were red and she was looking at the ground, almost as if she was... embarrassed?

We had spent more than six months now living in the same house. Yet somehow I never got tired of seeing her; every little gesture seemed fresh and sweet.

That’s why I was afraid.

It terrified me to think of her looking at me with hatred, or despair, or rejection. To think of her knowing what I really was.

And yet...

“Myusel,” I said, shifting in my seat. “It looks like I’ve been... an invader this whole time.”

“...What?” She looked at me in astonishment.

Fair enough, given the bombshell I’d just dropped.

“An... An invader, sir?”

“Yeah. I was sent here to help make the Holy Eldant Empire a vassal state of Japan. I was supposed to use otaku culture as a way of undermining any resistance from the people here. Or anyway, that’s what I’m told. I may not be carrying a sword or whatever, but I’m basically an enemy from a country that’s at war with your home.”

In a corner of my head, part of me was still yelling, *Stop!*

I didn’t *have* to tell Myusel these things. What if she rejected me? What if she hated me, or fell into despair, or looked at me with contempt? I might never recover. If Myusel abandoned me—well, I had a dim sense that the shock would be way worse than getting shot

down by my former childhood friend.

But still...

"It might... It might be best if I had never come to this country. I might not be able to stay with you guys."

Myusel swallowed hard, but didn't say anything at first. After a moment, though, she collected herself.

"I... I don't really understand," she said; and it was true, she sounded awfully lost. I mean, I had launched into a conversation about invasions and affairs of state. She wasn't an imperial or a noble, and she wasn't used to dealing with stuff like that on a moment's notice. She didn't know exactly how to respond.

"I'm very sorry. I'm... I'm stupid, and... and uneducated..."

No, wait, Myusel! I don't think you're stupid. And yeah, maybe you're not educated, but it's hardly your fault. You just never had the chance.

"Master.... you're so... you're so kind." She stared ever more fixedly at the ground. As if not content with that, her hands grabbed her apron tightly, as though she were trying to shrink. "You do so much for me... even though I'm no more than I am..."

"I'm not sure I'd say so much..." Certainly nothing to warrant somebody talking about me like this. "And anyway... how do you know it's not all just an act, part of my invasion?"

"What about when you... protected me? Even though it meant angering Her Imperial Majesty?"

She glanced up at me as she spoke. Just for a second, I wasn't sure what she was talking about—but I realized she must be thinking back to when I had only just come to the Holy Eldant Empire, when I had taken her side against Petralka, back before the two of them had become friends.

"Master... Whatever you're trying to do, surely protecting a pathetic servant girl like me from an empress... can't gain you anything, can it?"

"That's... I..."

When Myusel turned her imploring gaze on me, I found I couldn't speak.

She was exactly right. I guess there was some self-satisfaction to be found in looking out for Myusel, but otherwise, nothing. However Myusel felt about me, whether she loved me or hated me—it wouldn't make any particular difference to my work. Yes, she was supposed to be taking care of me, but that was her job, just like I had mine. She would do it, even if she despised the person she was working for.

If anything, talking back to the empress was—from the perspective of my role as General Manager of Amutech—ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times worse than sticking up for my maid.

"And I'm so happy..." Myusel went on, "that we get to eat with

you. I never knew... that eating could be so much fun. I learned that from you, Master."

"Myusel..."

"And yet I... can't do anything to thank you, Master..."

"Thank me? You don't have to do anything to—"

"I'm jealous of Elvia-san. Because she's able to help you..."

"I told you, Myusel, you're a big help to me. Heck, you *saved* me!"

It reminded me of what she had said before, so I told her again what I had told her then—about the cooking, and the cleaning, and the laundry. Those things might seem simple enough to her, but I was extremely grateful for them. And you never want to be hated by someone you're grateful to.

At that, a thought occurred to me.

Didn't Myusel feel the same way about me? Whatever I was thinking, whatever was in my head, didn't matter. Facts change in all sorts of ways depending on who's looking at them. "Truth" has a lot to do with the feelings of the person accepting it. My gratitude toward Myusel was my truth, and her truth was that I was kind to her. Yeah, it was kind of confusing. But still.

"Master... Shinichi-sama," Myusel said. "Please don't say such frightening... and sad things... like that we would be better off without you..."

I couldn't speak.

"I'm begging you... Please... Please stay here with us!"

This girl... It's like she was created to tug on my heartstrings.

I had a dangerous bit of tightrope-walking in mind. I didn't know if it was going to work out, and if I screwed up, there was a good chance I would find myself in a very different position. I might even have to leave this mansion without a chance to say goodbye to Myusel or the others.

That was why I'd needed something to stoke me up. Someone to say to me, "It's okay for you to be here." I'd wanted someone to give me a little push to help get me going.

No... Not someone.

Myusel.

She was the first person from "this side" that I'd met when I arrived in the Eldant Empire; she was basically the physical embodiment of what the words "another world" conjured for me.

That was why I'd wanted her permission, or perhaps her forgiveness. Why I'd wanted to ask her the question: *Can I stay here?*

"Okay," I said, nodding. "Thank you."

"Wha...?" She looked at me for a second, confused, but then—

"Yes, sir...!"

A smile as beautiful as a flower blossomed on her face.



The sun shone brightly. It was still early in the morning—my watch said not even 6:00 a.m.

The Eldant Empire, though, was a country of early risers, and people were already out and about. I could hardly complain about being sleepy—although in fact, I hadn't slept a wink the night before.

I stood in front of the thick door. Beyond it was the audience chamber, the place where you could meet the empress publicly to talk, or to make your case. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that all the power in the Eldant Empire was concentrated in this room. I hadn't thought too much about it when I'd been here before, but a few words exchanged right here could decide the fate of hundreds or thousands—in extreme cases, even tens of thousands.

No pressure.

No sooner had the two royal guards announced, "Kanou Shinichisama has arrived!" than the door ground open.

"Master," Myusel murmured encouragingly from beside me.

Minori-san, who was also with me, didn't say a word, just nodded. Given her employer, I could understand if she didn't want to be too obvious about taking my part. It's tough to bite the hand that feeds you.

"Yeah. It's gonna be fine," I said with a nod, and then I stepped into the audience chamber.

It looked just like it had the last time I'd been there. The ceiling vaulted above me; a narrow red carpet stretched ahead of me like a road. Against the far wall was a dais raised so high that several staircases were required to reach it, and on top of it was the throne.

Dressed in their most resplendent outfits, the prime minister along with nine of the empire's other ministers were lined up one step below the throne and looking down upon the supplicant—namely, me. In addition to Prime Minister Zahar, I could see the knight Garius among them.

Sitting on the throne was, needless to say, the girl empress Petralka.

Silence. The collective gaze of all these worthies fell upon me. It seemed to ask, *Just what is he here for?*

I hadn't yet explained the reason I had asked for this official audience with Petralka. They would never normally have accepted an audience request whose purpose was unspecified, but I leaned on Petralka and Garius to make it happen.

Minori-san, who was armed, and Myusel, who was a maid, were not allowed into the audience chamber. After the terrorist incident, they had become more strict about who they let into this room.

But the show must go on...

"Well come, Shinichi. We've been waiting!" Petralka announced.

Beside her, Prime Minister Zahar gave a pointed cough. "Shinichi-dono requested to be allowed to participate in the morning audience today..."

"And despite its suddenness, his petition has been accepted," Petralka said in her most dictatorial tone. "The otaku culture he has brought from Japan even now influences our empire in a way that cannot be ignored. We believe there is wisdom in hearing the thoughts of its evangelist, Shinichi."

A murmur ran through the assembled VIPs. Well, that was only natural. Some "evangelist" drops by from who knows where, earns the attentions—I mean the totally *platonic* attentions, okay?—of the empress, and then starts acting like he wants to meddle in politics and stuff. I could understand why I was getting the stink eye from a few of them. I must have seemed a bit like the Japanese monk Doko, or Rasputin in Russia—religious figures who got close to female rulers, to the detriment of their countries.

"Not that I know the first thing about politics," I muttered to myself with a wry smile, before stepping forward to address that very ruler and all the people around her.

I looked around at the ranks of important personages, then spoke in a voice loud enough to carry to everyone in the room.

"I have a suggestion."

There was a mix of caution and curiosity in the looks that came back at me. I was sure the nobles would be paying close attention to everything I said and did. If I got too close to the empress, their own share of authority could be severely threatened. I assumed they were each evaluating me: if they thought they could use me, they would; but if they thought I was going to get in their way, they would get rid of me.

"Some time has passed since the establishment of Amutech, the company that's introducing otaku culture. The same is true of the school Amutech runs," I said, forcing a quaver out of my voice.

Calm down, Kanou Shinichi! You need to have your game face on.

"At present, we have some people who have learned enough Japanese to conduct daily conversation without trouble, and more and more students are learning to read and write. I think it may be time to consider taking the next steps."

"...And what steps would those be?" Zahar asked on behalf of the crowd.

"I have several in mind. Consider: otaku culture, and the Japanese language necessary to understand it, have begun to spread among the nobility and the merchant class of commoners, but ultimately only a

very small percentage of the population has been able to encounter otaku culture directly. Most commoners are left with only secondhand knowledge that they pick up from the students.”

“Meaning?” Garius asked solicitously, his interest obviously piqued.

I gave an exaggerated nod and went on. “I propose opening the school to everyone, including commoners. In addition, I recommend foreign expansion.”

The murmur among the nobles became a distinct buzz.

Now was the time to press my point home. I raised my voice a little more and forged ahead. “Any merchant interested in the current state of Eldant has surely noticed the craze for otaku culture among the nobility. Because of the limits on how much product we can bring from Japan, the sale of otaku goods has been prohibited until now—but I say we should permit buying and selling those goods, as well as allowing them to be exported to other countries.”

I let my eyes sweep the assembled crowd, then delivered the *coup de grace*: “We allow traveling merchants to carry otaku culture beyond the Eldant Empire.”

“Are you suggesting our empire should take otaku culture as its export?” Petralka asked, sending a fresh wave of chatter through the crowd.

Up to this point, the otaku culture Japan had brought in was a localized phenomenon, a trend in the Eldant Empire. For better or for worse, it had been centralized under Amutech’s control and oversight.

But what would happen if it became a commodity *from the Eldant Empire itself*? Of course, the Japanese government might try to exact a large payment from the empire. Granted we shared no common currency, it might be in the form of something like mineral resources or food, something that had real value in Japan. As far as that went, there was still no official exchange rate established between the two nations. The chance of Japan totally ripping off the Eldant people would be obvious to anyone. But—

“But it’s not such a bad idea.” This came from Garius. “Just like any import or export, even a small tariff on a commodity good like this could produce significant profit. For that matter, if we were able to fix the selling price of otaku works themselves, that itself could bring real abundance.”

I knew he was sharp. He practically made my points for me. And he kept going.

“Allowing general admission to the school is intriguing as well. If we don’t concern ourselves with noble qualification, we could easily be open to those who wish to come from abroad to study with us... bringing their money with them, of course.”

Another noble broke in hurriedly, “Perhaps so, but that would be as good as inviting in enemy spies in the guise of ‘studying abroad.’”

Garius frowned and said, “All the better to have them in one place where we can keep an eye on them, then. Kill a spy or an intelligence agent, and another one will replace them, but so long as the current agent is alive there will be no others. Indeed, to a living agent we can feed convenient misinformation and send them on home.”

Several of the nobles exchanged stunned looks.

“On top of that, the increased flow of people and money will allow our own merchants to report back to us about the state of other nations.”

“That’s true,” I nodded.

As Garius had understood almost immediately, if they got rid of their rigid perspective and took the long view, this could actually be a pretty good thing for the Eldant Empire. A new market, a new source of income. And after seeing how wildly otaku culture had succeeded here, it was easy to imagine it exploding the same way in other countries. Each place would have its own national characteristics, but the many variations of otaku culture would, I was confident, allow it to adapt.

I offered a further suggestion. “Otaku culture has already spread among the people of the Eldant Empire. As a test, why not send out bards and minstrels and the like to other countries, to see how they’re received?”

The elves had developed a mode of declaiming light novels to musical accompaniment that was experiencing a small boom in the downtown markets. People at the bars loved it, of course, but I had heard that even farmers were humming the songs as they worked in the fields. Nobles were summoning groups of famous bards to hold contests and sing-offs.

“I see...” someone muttered. By giving a concrete example of something they were familiar with, it looked like I had helped wake them up to the possibilities. Now the nobles were starting to talk amongst themselves, and a lot of what they were saying was positive.

Okay. Looking good.

I was just starting to feel confident when—

“Wait, Kanou-kun!”

—there was a shout from the audience chamber door. I turned and looked—and there was Matoba-san.

“That’s going too f—”

“Why is that?” I asked, interrupting him.

I knew, of course, why he would oppose what I was saying. For the Japanese government to take advantage of Eldant’s resources, first they had to brainwash the place with otaku culture, make it their

puppet. If the empire were to take control of the industry before that happened, the Japanese government would be out of luck.

“What, exactly, is going too far?” I pressed.

“You...” Matoba-san was actually lost for words. At last, with a sour expression, he said, “.....You overstep your authority.”

Obviously, he couldn’t threaten me outright with the empress and all those nobles in attendance.

Take that. I felt a nasty little rush as I smirked at the silent Matoba-san.

“My authority has nothing to do with it,” I said. “The Eldant Empire would be doing everything. I only offered a suggestion.”

There was no chance now of stopping otaku culture from having an influence on the Eldant Empire. And unless the Japanese government decided to seal off the hyperspace tunnel for some reason, well, it would eventually spread to the rest of this world. I could struggle and fight all I wanted; it wouldn’t change that.

We’re not just talking about otaku stuff—when culture is accepted by a large number of people, then it spreads, goes everywhere. There’s no arguing with it. Sure, governments have tried from time to time, but that’s how the world works.

If the people receiving the culture have a choice—if it’s not being forced upon them or withheld from them—then that’s enough. Maybe I could help create an environment where the people of the Eldant Empire, and indeed of this whole world, could choose for themselves. Eventually, otaku stuff would be subsumed, become part of this world’s native culture. After all, what got brought on board and what didn’t was partly a function of the culture and history these people already had.

“We see. Very interesting,” Petralka said, leaning forward on her throne.

She seemed to buy into what I was saying, as did Garius. I suspected Prime Minister Zahar, who had always been in favor of cultural exchange, would be on my side as well. And with the empress’s two most powerful advisors in agreement, and the other nobles seeing something to gain, it was going to be almost impossible to stop this from happening.

Which meant, of course, that now I was pretty much useless. My mission had been to “spread otaku culture,” and it looked like I had just done it.

Matoba-san couldn’t very well get rid of me publicly. But...

At that moment, it struck me. I saw that all expression had vanished from Matoba-san’s face, which until now had always had that pasted-on smile.

And I knew what that meant.

Chapter Five: Operation Assassination

23:00 local time...

In the Eldant Empire, which tended to start and end the day early, this was smack in the middle of the night.

A curtain of darkness had fallen over the world. A group of men snuck through the bushes, crouching low. The goggles they wore looked crude and out of place, but were equipped with night vision. With their camouflage uniforms and the equipment that covered half their faces, it was hard to make out who they were.

Their square jaws looked awfully tough, and their muscled bodies were covered in black battle uniforms along with bullet- and blade-proof vests. They were wearing helmets—black too, of course. They practically screamed *night raid*.

They were the Central Readiness Force of the Ground JSDF—a special operations unit.

Much like America's SOCOM, this was a special unit composed of elite soldiers that essentially reported directly to headquarters. They were the part of the JSDF that specialized in counterterrorism and guerrilla warfare. In other words, covert killings were well within their mandate.

None of their equipment bore any unit insignia, of course. Those had been deliberately left off. It was obvious why. Let's just say they hadn't gotten royal permission to come in-country.

It was sort of silly, actually. They were the only ones in the Eldant Empire to possess equipment like this.

The troops moved forward, using hand signals to communicate. They were heading for the employee housing of the parallel-world-first general entertainment company, Amutech. They had already confirmed the location of their target—namely, Kanou Shinichi. The lights in his bedroom had gone out almost an hour ago, and no other lights were to be seen anywhere in the house. Presumably, everyone in the mansion was asleep.

The squad leader didn't speak a word, just rested his hand on his shoulder, signaling. One by one, the soldiers advanced on the target house.

Then one of the soldiers looked up, as if he sensed something. He stiffened—there, in the branches above him, was some kind of round

shape. No doubt the thing showed a pale green on the other side of his passive infrared night vision goggles. It was some kind of small bird of prey, no larger than thirty-seven centimeters.

An owl.

But it was clearly not the same creature the JSDF trooper knew from his home world. It had no eyes on its head, just one lolling oculus in the center of its stomach. As far as the soldier could tell, the thing defied common sense. He might well have called it a monster.

“.....Ugly little freak,” he muttered. In principle, unnecessary talk was verboten during an operation, but maybe it was simply impossible not to remark on the creature. The men in this unit might be the elite of the elite, but they had never fought in an alternate world, nor even practiced how to operate in one. Most likely, it had only been a few days earlier that they had even learned of the existence of this place.

Quiet as shadows, the soldiers circled around to the back entrance. The captain pulled a key out of a bag and unlocked the door, and then in they came, not one of them making a sound.

True, most special-ops forces you see breaking into houses in movies are a little more violent—blowing up walls and piling into rooms and stuff—but that’s when the enemy is expecting them and speed is of the essence. If your targets aren’t on the lookout for you, you want to keep it that way as long as you can, until you’re right up close.

Real pros use their weapons as little as possible. Minimize casualties, maximize effect: that’s the working rule for a special force.

The troopers arrived at the bedroom they were targeting and lined up on either side of the door. They nodded silently at each other once more, then one of them grasped the doorknob.

An instant later...

“Hrk?!”

...the door flew open inward by itself. The trooper was thrown completely off-balance; he probably hadn’t expected anything like this.

The room lit up like a light switch had been thrown. And there in the very manorial room—

“Welcome *home*, Master!”

—were thirty or so maids.



Not classic Victorian maids, though—these ladies were dressed anime-style, more of a French-maid vibe. Frills and lace everywhere, skirts that only went down to the knees, outfits that emphasized their chests. White knee-high socks covered their slim legs, and they wore headdresses that were as frilly as everything else they had on. The youngest of them was only right around ten years old, while the oldest seemed to be about in her early twenties.

Then there were the pointy ears that stuck out from under their hair, the proof that they were elves.

“Welcome *home*, Master!”

They spoke in that special, saccharine tone that maids have—what we might think of as an “anime voice.” Not to mention, our illegal-immigrant friends—namely, the JSDF troopers—weren’t wearing magical translator rings (those were issued by the Eldant Empire), so the words the girls were saying must have sounded awfully strange to them.

“The hell...?!” one of the soldiers growled. The prohibition on chatter seemed to have gone out the window.

In response, the Beautiful Maid Brigade cocked their collective heads. They didn’t seem to know quite what to make of the special-ops force that had burst into the room.

“I get it. It’s that otaku,” the squad leader said venomously. “So he was using government money to surround himself with women... Where is he now? Having his fun?”

The man was obviously confused, but he knew there was a serious otaku in here, so maybe he figured it only made sense that the mansion should be home to all kinds of bizarre, possibly depraved amusements.

The captain turned to his unit and nodded again. “Just ignore the girls. Check if the target’s in the bed.”

“Roger.”

With that brief answer, one of the men in black began pushing his way through the sea of maids, his footsteps loud—he was almost on the target now, there was no need to be discreet—and advanced into the room.

The surprised maids watched the unit move forward; meanwhile, the girls were discussing something amongst themselves. Of course, the JSDF men had no idea what the maids were actually saying. Most people might have guessed, though, that it was something like, “Who are these people?” or, “Goodness, what trouble.” Several of the maids grabbed onto the soldiers, trying to stop them from moving.

The troopers seemed somewhat confused.

They were members of the military of Japan—a country that was,

for better or for worse, largely peaceful. They had all been raised with the belief that women and children were weak and should be protected. Yes, they had heard the stories from the Vietnam War—episode after episode where American troops had tried to help children, only to have the kids throw hand grenades at them and kill them. But it was very hard to immediately think *enemy* when confronted with such sweet-looking people.

“Clear ‘em out,” the captain ordered coldly.

There was an instant’s hesitation on the part of his men, but then they nodded and pulled pistols from the holsters on their belts. They looked weirdly toy-like; they weren’t the JSDF’s standard-issue 9mm handguns, but some kind of taser. One assumed they had been sternly warned to cause as few casualties as possible, other than the target himself, of course. Too many Eldant deaths would make future diplomacy a lot harder.

Men and maids looked at each other in perplexity. One of the soldiers had turned his taser toward a young woman, but she only smiled and grasped his wrist gently with both hands. The Eldant Empire had no knowledge of guns, so it made sense that she wouldn’t identify it as a weapon. Perfectly normal behavior.

What came next? Not so much.

“Hah!” The maid let out an exhalation of breath bordering on a karate yell. And then the JSDF soldier found himself flying over the shoulder of an opponent half his size.

“Hrgh!”

The man was caught unawares, leaving him no opportunity to breakfall; he hit the ground hard and, with a grunt, went out like a light. The other elf girls ran toward him, pulling out rope they had hidden in their skirts. The rope moved on its own, like a snake, tying the man up in the blink of an eye.

“Wha—?!”

What had happened? The JSDF trooper’s mind probably only went blank for second. Just a second. But a whole second. In a constantly changing situation that demanded nonstop reappraisal and judgment, that was a crucial blank.

The maids took advantage of this exceedingly brief period to do what they had to do. The JSDF soldiers were tough, and had every kind of technological advantage. The maids grabbed them and threw them, or hugged them from behind and tied them up. The blade- and bullet-proof vests were no use against strangleholds, or impacts to the entire body. That youngest maid grabbed one of the soldiers; he gave a low moan and bent his head back. It didn’t look like much from the outside, but he could probably hear the sound of his own body being choked and crushed—*squish-crunch* or some similarly unpleasant

noise.

In an eyeblink, half the soldiers were unconscious and out of commission.

“Wh-Wha—?!” Seeing his men go down one after another, the captain brought his gun to bear. By now, he had probably figured it out: the Maid Brigade wasn’t just some otaku’s pervy little indulgence. They were a trap, set specifically to take care of the special operators.

“You have permission to fire! Shoot! Shoot!” Apparently, he had decided they didn’t have time to patiently knock out their opponents with the tasers. His unit clicked the safeties off on their suppressed Type 89s and took aim at the maids.

There was a gunshot. Then another, and another.

Spent shell casings arced through the air in time with the series of muffled explosions, jangling to a halt on the floor.

Steel traveling faster than the speed of sound hit the maids, pierced their willowy bodies, driving itself cruelly into flesh, shattering bone, as the targets collapsed to the floor...

“Th—”

Gotcha. You can assume that’s what the soldiers expected to happen.

The reality, though, was totally different.

“This can’t be!”

They stopped firing after expending half the ammunition in their clips. The soldiers’ faces were largely hidden by their goggles, making their expressions hard to read, but astonishment and confusion were most likely the order of the day.

Every single one of the maids was just standing there, perfectly calm and normal.

The elf girls had all stretched their palms out as if they were shields. A sort of barrier emitting a faint light stood between the elves and the operators.

“Are they using... magic?!” The captain’s voice was drowned out by the maids, who let out another barrage of karate shouts and fell on the soldiers again.



“Bwahahahahahahaha!”

A laugh that could reach the ceiling bellowed through the room. And who should it be gazing into a crystal ball and cackling like a final boss but Petralka?

Uh... Actually, I'm a little weirded out by how well that laugh suits her. And that fan in her hand? Total bad-girl look.

“Hah! They are so predictable! Predictable to a fault!” she said,

starting to slap the armrests in her mirth. “They came to finish you off, Shinichi, just as we expected. It seems human minds think alike, no matter which world they come from!”

We were actually right there in the mansion, but we were camped out in a storage room that I rarely went into. Now we were using it as an impromptu command center, and things looked a little different from usual in here. All the crap had been carried out or shoved up against the wall, leaving a big open space in the middle of the room. A blueprint of the mansion had been unrolled, and about fifty wooden pieces were arranged on top of it.

Fifteen of them were red, thirty were blue. But there were five that were white. These colors referred respectively to the JSDF, the Maid Brigade, and—yes—us.

Normally, you only see maps and playing pieces like this for large-scale operations. I had some doubts as to whether all this kit was really necessary for one fight in one mansion, but, eh. I kept them to myself. Three big crystal balls resided against one wall, broadcasting to us, via magic, everything that was seen by our enchanted sneaks, the one-eyed owls.



Petralka was lounging in a high-backed chair that she had put where she could see all three crystal balls at once, looking quite pleased. Beside her were Garius and the commander of the royal guard, whom we had borrowed from the castle.

This particular commander was a woman, and the royal guards she commanded were none other than the maids who were currently beating the hand-picked forces of the JSDF silly.

Given that Petralka was a young woman, the soldiers who served and protected her in the castle were women as well. Many of them were demi-humans (as you'll recall, both male and female demi-humans often had military experience), and in fact, I gathered that the maids who had been serving us on the terrace the other day had also been among the empress's personal guard.

It was my understanding that these female soldiers had been requested because constantly having burly armed men at your side tended to spoil a mood. I knew that elves were usually good at magical warfare, and when it came to dwarves, even the women had enough power in their small statures to overcome a full-grown human man. They were ideally suited to attend an imperial or noble personage without having to constantly carry a weapon.

Plus, the maid thing definitely got people to lower their guard. Despite the way they looked, the members of the Maid Brigade were all adults. And the dwarven soldiers may all have seemed like little girls from a human perspective, but I heard some of them had several kids!

"Even so, I bet they never pictured themselves getting done in by a bunch of maids," I murmured. It's not the sort of thing elite military units tend to train for.

Beside me, Myusel cast her eyes sadly at the ground. "I can't believe people from Japan really came to kill you. And so many of them... Brooke-san and I alone could never have protected you."

Wait, so she had been planning to try to protect me if anything happened? I felt kind of good about that, and kind of bad...

"Minister Cordobal," I said, addressing Garius, who stood with his arms crossed beside Petralka, keeping a close eye on the situation. For what it's worth, the idea for this strategy had come mostly from Petralka, but given that Garius had actual battle experience, he was the one who assumed command.

"Yes? What is it?" he asked, not looking away from the crystal balls.

"Why are you doing all this for me? Getting your military involved and everything? I'm just—"

I left off there. But the silver-haired knight glanced back at me, an

incongruous smile on his face. I felt like he could see right through me, see everything.

"Truth be told, Shinichi, I myself had an inkling of what the Japanese government was aiming at."

"...Er. Sure. I guess I shouldn't be surprised." I actually felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders when I heard that. Garius and Prime Minister Zahar were pretty sharp customers. I had found that they, at the very least, weren't so attached to old ways of doing things that it caused them to misjudge a situation they were faced with. I shouldn't have been surprised if they of all people had spotted what was lurking in the shadows of the Japanese government's sweet talk about "cultural exchange."

"But that just makes me more curious..."

Why go out of their way to help me, then?

"That question would be better answered by Her Majesty," Garius said. I looked from him to Petralka.

"Mm. True enough," the empress said. She assumed a thoughtful look, frowning slightly and making a noise in the back of her throat. "How shall we put this? Garius may be able to fathom all this, but personally, we find 'invasion by otaku culture' to be rather difficult to understand. The spread of new culture always leaves the rubble of the old in its wake, does it not? The idea of using such a force as a tool of invasion is impossibly vague. We have trouble feeling that it's quite real."

"I... I guess you could be right about that."

That was exactly what made cultural invasions so terrifying. There was as good a chance as any that by the time people realized what was going on, it would all be over.

"Neither is it the case," Petralka went on, "that we in the Eldant Empire mindlessly accept all that we are given. When new culture is absorbed, it is planted in the seedbed of what is already there, until it blooms afresh as a combination of old and new. Our empire is a place of many races, and its traditions are not to be manipulated so easily."

She looked, frankly, triumphant—and I smiled at her. "You're sure right about that."

It actually wasn't that different from Japan. There were times in history when Japan was behind the cultural development curve. It sent emissaries to Sui and Tang, China to learn about foreign culture and bring it back. In fact, they went so far as to proactively seek out foreigners who had left their home countries for one reason or another, especially those with special skills, like engineering.

Had Japan stopped being Japan at that point? Had it turned into a little piece of China? Of course not.

The Eldant Empire was the same way. From a certain perspective,

Petralka and the others could prevent the culture we brought in from being invasive. As long as the empire handled it with self-awareness, otaku culture would lose its effectiveness as a weapon of invasion.

All of this was more or less the same conclusion I'd reached.

"However," Petralka added with a severe look, "acceptance is viable only when the purveyor of the new culture adopts a humble attitude, as you have done, Shinichi. When instead the ambitious seek to impose their will upon us, culture is arbitrarily distorted, and of course the commoners' thinking is defiled along with it."

That was cultural invasion, indeed cultural pollution. Controlled, not free. Perverted because someone was trying to manage it.

Culture should, fundamentally, be free—that was why I had deliberately decided not to try to force anyone to adopt what I was introducing. The people who liked it would take it, and those who didn't could leave it. That was all. But in a way, that was everything.

"Shinichi," Petralka said with a smile. "That is why we—the empress, the Eldant Empire—chose you to be the one who brought us this new culture."

I was silent. Maybe the previous day's audience had been a test—a test for me, to find out whether or not I was really an invader in the Eldant Empire.

"This is strange," the guard commander muttered. "Observers six and ten are blind. There were supposed to be fifteen enemies, but I only count eleven tied up."

This provoked an immediate reaction from Garius. "No! Check all the Observers, immediately!"

More than twenty of the magical creatures had been positioned inside and outside the mansion, broadcasting what they were seeing to us. Even if one of them went down by some accident—caught by a stray bullet, for example—there was no way we should have lost track of the entire JSDF unit.

Meaning...

"Huh?"

There was a clatter as something fell at my feet. It was on the large side, like a 500-milliliter bottle of cola. I reflexively looked in the direction the object had come from and saw that the door to the store room—the door to our little think tank—was slightly ajar.

"Crap!"

I went stiff; Garius was bug-eyed with shock.

About a second later, the tear-gas grenade blew, filling the room with white smoke.



I suppose I should be grateful for the special ops guys' restraint. If that had been a regular hand grenade, or maybe an incendiary bomb, we would have been blown to smithereens. But instead, the soldiers stayed faithful to their stated objective of killing no one except the target (me, in case you forgot) and otherwise keeping casualties to a minimum. True, the guys ambushed by the Maid Brigade eventually opened fire, but still.

The room filled with a white haze. My eyes, my nose, the inside of my mouth—every exposed surface felt like it was being stuck full of needles. My eyes were running with tears—I knew I needed to be able to see clearly, but it was a biological response that I couldn't control. So my vision blurred, and I lost track of what was what. And that was before the violent coughing started.

My ears, at least, still seemed to be working; I could hear someone else coughing, too. At the moment, though, I didn't have the slightest idea who was. Myusel? Petralka? Garius? The lady commander? No idea. No time to care, either. Tear gas may be a parade example of a non-lethal weapon, but it's not pleasant, not by a long shot. I thought I even remembered reading somewhere that a person with a weak respiratory system could die from inhaling it.

If we got any more gas in this room, we were going to be out of options.

"The window!" I heard Petralka shout. "Open the window!"

She had seen me use the fire extinguisher during that terrorist attack, and she must have figured tear gas was something similar. An instant later...

"*Tifu Murotsu!*"

I heard Myusel's voice, accompanied by the punch of a wave of magic. The window, frame and all, was blown away with a *wumph*. I could just make it out through my tear-streaked vision. When it occurred to me that the incantation for this spell took close to a minute, I realized Myusel must have been preparing this magic since the moment I had first cried out on seeing the tear gas canister.

The impact flushed the gas out of the room. Myusel had both her hands out in front of her, her eyes streaming with tears, no doubt from the gas.

But there was no time for a sigh of relief. A dark shape loomed in front of me. I took a step back.

It was a JSDF soldier wearing a gas mask.

From the "Protect Gear" of *The Red Spectacles* to the soldiers of *Fallout* to the stormtroopers of *Star Wars*, this sort of equipment has always been played for how intimidating it is up close. It looks so nearly human that its inhuman elements are somehow heightened.

I gulped. He was so close I could have reached out and touched

him. Plus, he was holding a 9mm handgun.

If he decided to shoot me, there was no way he would miss. I was sure he was well-trained, too. I went pale, feeling like my consciousness might be sucked down that yawning black barrel. It's kind of embarrassing—but in this case, it also saved my life.

I collapsed to my knees.

There was a huge roar inches above my head. You could hardly have fit a sheet of paper between me and that bullet; I felt the air tremble as it went by. Absolutely terrifying me, of course.

“Master!” Myusel shrieked. Then, “*Tifu Murottsu!*”

She invoked the spell again (just as a note, I gathered that when you cast the same spell twice, you could significantly shorten the incantation), and the soldier was blown backward. He tried to fire a second time, but the shot went off in some random direction, smashing through the wall and scattering debris.

There was still no time for a sigh of relief. I looked up to see another soldier, not three meters from me.

“Shinichi!” Petralka shouted. At the same moment, something came flying by.

It was a knight. *The knight.* Garius.

He had his blade out as fast as if he were in a duel, and cut at the soldier. The sword as such was stopped by the blade-proof vest, but the momentum of the attack from such a short distance meant there was bound to be some force behind it. The trooper was thrown off-balance—and a second later, a morning star buried itself in his head.

It was the female commander.

Normally a weapon like that would crush the skull and snuff out the victim's life. This JSDF man could thank his helmet that he would wind up with nothing more than a concussion. There was no visible blood, but he slumped to the floor and stopped moving.

But there were still two soldiers left.

“Drop your weapons!” they cried.

They had gotten the wall behind them, and they were carrying Type 89s.

The Type 89 is a high-tech assault rifle the JSDF is pretty proud of. Just flip a switch, and it spits out 5.56mm bullets like a machine gun. Almost irresistible for spraying a room with suppressive fire.

These soldiers had two of those guns, and they were both pointed right at me.

Petralka and the others, of course, couldn't understand exactly what the soldiers were saying. But under the circumstances, it wasn't hard to guess what they meant.



Everyone froze. Neither Garius nor the commander, however, laid down their arms.

“Weapons down, I said!” one of the soldiers shouted.

But me? I was looking out the now-absent window.

“Guys,” I said, “I think you’re the ones who’d better put down your weapons.”

An instant later, two arms were protruding from the wall beside the soldiers.

I don’t mean figuratively or metaphorically or whatever. Just, suddenly a couple of scaly, blue arms with huge claws had punched through the wall.

The astonished soldiers were too slow to react. Even as they cried out, one hand grabbed each of their necks—firmly. I told you, right? Bullet- and blade-proof vests can protect you from, well, bullets and blades, but there are plenty of other ways to attack a person. Those vests didn’t come up to their necks, anyway.

“Hrgh... Gah!”

From where we previously had three windows, we now had a collection of lizardmen piling into the room. There were almost a dozen of them. They quickly moved to surround the JSDF soldiers and confiscated their guns.

“Master.” One lizardman, even bigger than the others, emerged from the middle of the circle. It was Brooke. “Please forgive the delay.”

The two soldiers had already been virtually stripped of their weapons and equipment. But Brooke nodded, and almost as if to add insult to injury, the lizardmen pulled something new in through the window.

Two people, tied up with rope: Matoba-san and Minori-san.

“Dammit...” Maybe the soldiers had finally resigned themselves to their situation, because they put up their hands helplessly.

Then...

“Koganuma-kun.” Matoba-san glanced back at Minori-san. Despite the fact that he was tied up, he didn’t look remotely upset or nervous. In fact, he had a sort of dry smile on his face. “I’m sure someone was supposed to be keeping watch in the direction our lizard friends attacked from... Wasn’t it you?”

“Yes, sir,” Minori-san said nonchalantly. “I have no excuse. I was keeping watch, but... well, it’s like you say, Bureau Chief, sir. They’re lizards. They’re hard to detect with infrared night vision.”

Incidentally, I didn’t think that was true. Yes, lizardmen were cold-blooded, their body temperature dropping when the ambient temperature went down. But I assumed the night vision equipment

employed by JSDF—the special forces, no less—was third-generation passive stuff. That means it would use black-body radiation to detect the infrared rays emitted by all physical objects and turn them into visible light. It couldn't give you full color, but it wasn't any worse than watching a black-and-white television. The other guy wouldn't be invisible just because he was cold.

On top of that, lizardmen really had variable body temperatures; biologically they could be considered ectotherms. By staying in a warm place, they could build up body heat to a fair extent and preserve it for longer than you might think. It's the same sort of thing turtles and lizards do when they bask in the sun. I knew, of course, that Brooke built his campfires for much the same reason.

And on top of *that*, even if lizardmen really could “blend in” on night vision equipment by assuming the ambient temperature—well, Minori-san had been in the Eldant Empire for months. She, if anyone, would have known they could do that.

It was clear that Minori-san, much to my benefit, had purposely ignored the approaching lizardmen.

Matoba-san, that half-smile still on his face, gave a sigh.

“Well, isn't this something,” Brooke said, pounding his own chest. “Doesn't need magic, you don't have to start a fire, and it's lighter than a hot-water bottle.”

Then he held something out. It was a disposable hand-warmer.

That's right: Brooke and his friends had used these to get themselves a little heat and allow themselves to move more quickly. I had actually had Minori-san get them for me from the JSDF in the first place.

“Kanou Shinichi,” Matoba-san said after a moment. “It seems we must admit defeat, for the time being.”

I didn't speak.

“So, then. What precisely do you plan to do now?”

“I have a request for you. All of you,” I said.

Obviously, Matoba-san & co. were in no position to refuse.



I took a deep breath and looked up. Behind me stood Petralka and Myusel, Brooke, Garius, and lots more besides, from the Maid Brigade to the captured JSDF soldiers, along with Minori-san and Matoba-san. Their collective gaze was fixed on me, and on the communications device in front of me.

The communications device was already powered on; a staticky sound, like sand being poured over metal, came from the speakers.

We were at the Eldant training camp—i.e., the place the Japanese

military was renting part of, and also where the special ops guys had been temporarily based when they were sent over to assassinate me.

That's right: the object in front of me was a digital communication device with encrypting functionality. The special operations unit had brought it over here to help them keep in touch with their superiors.

"It seems you've connected."

The static suddenly resolved into a voice, a distinctly serious male voice that definitely sounded like some old guy with an awful lot of authority. If I may elaborate, he sounded like someone who was very used to looking right down his nose at people and chewing them out, twisting the screws with just a word or two.

The guy on the other end of the line was the big cheese responsible for running the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. Yet I didn't even know his name. I didn't especially want to know, either, because if it turned out to be the prime minister or something, I would probably get so intimidated that I would trip over my own tongue.

"Good to meet you," I said as soberly as I could. "My name is Kanou Shinichi, and I run the general entertainment company Amutech. Well, perhaps I should add a qualification: *for the time being...*"

No sooner had I said that than there was a loud scoff. It sounded like there was more than one person on the other end of the line.

"This is treason, plain and simple!"

"You don't understand the importance of your work."

"If you apologize immediately and do as we say, you may yet be pardoned."

And so on and so forth...

I couldn't help smiling. Did these guys *know* they sounded like half-baked villains? I practically expected one of them to say "I'll give you half the world" or something. They might be politicians, but when it came down to it, they were still only human.

Their wheedling and threatening sounded like it could've come from one of the stupider moments on the floor of the Diet. Heck, it probably had. These guys pretty much talked this way for a living, right?

Finally—

"Pipe down for a moment. Let me be our spokesperson." It was that first voice I'd heard. The other speakers immediately went quiet. "Now then," the voice said, "Kanou Shinichi."

"Yes?"

"As you can hear, we're very concerned about the way you've gone rogue. We dearly want you to come home."

The voice spoke slowly and deliberately; he was choosing his

words carefully. I glanced at the JSDF soldiers behind me.

“Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it.”

“I believe there’s been some kind of misunderstanding. Our only interest is that you, the one who has achieved so much in promoting cultural exchange, should make it back to Japan safely. After all, there’s no telling what might happen in some other world.”

He was beating around the bush, being ambiguous—classic politician.

“Listen to me, now. We have only your best interests in mind. We’ve had reports that you’ve been neglecting your duties for some days now. Some of us are worried that being sent to an unfamiliar environment so suddenly has had an adverse impact on your psychological state. Come home. We urge you to see a specialist, someone who can evaluate and treat you.”

So were we just going to pretend the assassination attempt never happened?

“I’m not biting. Say I come wandering back home—then what? Some unfortunate accident?”

Maybe one of the soldiers’ guns goes off unintentionally. Maybe a rampaging truck runs me over. Maybe I get stabbed in a random act of violence. Or how about something more prosaic? A very unpleasant bout of food poisoning. A medical mishap that results in my untimely demise.

“I see you’re the suspicious type.”

“Nah. Just a coward.”

Silence from the other party. It stretched on for a minute or more, until finally, with a deep sigh, the voice started up again, slow and reluctant.

“We have great esteem for all you’ve achieved in such a short time. But if you insist on being obdurate and not coming home, then you leave us no choice. You were born and raised in Chiba, as I recall. Is that correct?”

I was a bit surprised by the sudden change of subject. It gave me a tingle of an unpleasant premonition.

“Your immediate family consists of your parents and a younger sister, is that correct?”

“So what if it does?” I asked after a moment. It was only with effort that I kept my composure.

Still, it was all too clear to me what the voice was trying to say. It was a dirty move—but undeniably effective. I was sure the people I was talking to had done similar things countless times before and were well acquainted with the usefulness of such tactics.

“If you come back to Japan now, and swear absolutely never to speak of anything that’s happened, we can guarantee the safety of

yourself and your family. You'd be kept under observation, of course. But we could find some pretext to give you a little stipend. Live within your means, and you could go your entire life without working ever again."

It was actually a pretty extraordinary idea: they were offering this former home security guard a second chance at a failed life. I could go back to school, have dinner with my family again, all the little things. All the stuff I could have done while I was in Japan, but chose to ignore. They may not seem like much, but taken together, the little things add up, until they bear real fruit. That was something I'd learned here in the Holy Eldant Empire, another world.

I didn't say anything. True, not everything I'd done since I got here was especially praiseworthy. There was the fact that I had been an invader, not to mention I had probably turned half of the next generation of nobles into irredeemable otaku.

That part of me—the invader part—wanted to take this opportunity to escape.

"Think hard about this, Kanou Shinichi-kun. Not that we can imagine why you should hesitate."

"That's true. You're absolutely right," I nodded. "I don't have to hesitate to tell you I'm not going back."

A hubbub broke out on the other end of the line. It quickly turned into a storm of shouting—shouting at me, by a bunch of men who were probably trusted with the most important offices of the government.

"A shut-in failure of a human being like you doesn't have the right to choose! You never did!"

"You think we can't do whatever we want to one piddling little household? You've abandoned your family!"

They had given up trying to hide their hostility.

"I'm betting none of you got elected on a platform of killing families, intimidating citizens, and calling people failures. How about I share the recording of everything you just said with the whole internet?"

"Silence! People who want nothing but escapism through children's cartoons and comic books have no right to speak! And nobody raised on such trash—nor their families—should have anything to do with the fate of the country!"

"Gee, tell me how you really feel."

Strangely, I wasn't intimidated—if anything, I felt my emotions cool and settle down. Maybe it was just... you can only get so scared or so angry before you go numb.

"I wonder what makes you think you have the right to badmouth otaku like that. To try to get rid of us. You're always so happy to

parade Cool Japan around, as long as it's making you money..."

"It's because you're a menace!" the loudest man exclaimed.

Ahh. Here we go. They had no basis for their criticism. All they knew about otakuism was the stuff that riled up the public. They had probably never even sat down and actually read a manga or watched an anime. That was why they could dream up something as ridiculous as brainwashing people with otaku culture. Not just dream it up, but actually attempt it. They had convinced themselves that an otaku-fied people would be easy to control.

Someone *had* been brainwashed here, in a manner of speaking—it was these bureaucrats who had let themselves be taken in by the superficial judgments of the public at large.

They probably figured otaku culture was no different from narcotics. They avoided it themselves, called it a danger—but when it would make them money or gain them power, they were only too happy to push it on others.

"Act as brave as you want, boy," another voice said, taking advantage of my silence to get in another jab. He sounded triumphant. "It doesn't change the position you're in. You may disavow your parents and your... younger sister, was it? But surely even you can't just stand by and watch them die. Or do you intend to offer them up as sacrifice in your own place?"

This time I really was lost for words. *Hostages*? That was the oldest trick in the book—but also one of the most effective.

"Pardon me a moment, gentlemen." The unexpected interruption came from Matoba-san, his voice perfectly calm. "This is Jinzaburou, the bureau chief, speaking. With your permission?"

"Yes, what?" the voice replied. "Right now, I don't think your opinion—"

"You may recall that one of our criteria for choosing this boy was that he be someone whose disappearance would have scant impact on the world. As you say, a shut-in otaku NEET certainly seems the definition of a failed human being. His parents seemed unlikely to make too much of a scene if he vanished, as well. That, I believe, was why we decided he would be perfect from a confidentiality standpoint."

Geez. He's really not pulling his punches, is he?

Every word was like getting stabbed in the heart. But then...

"Yes? And what about it?"

"We chose him because his family might well be willing to overlook his absence. So what gives you the confidence that he wouldn't also be willing to overlook the absence of his family?"

There was a shocked silence on the other end of the line.

"Remember, gentlemen, we're talking about someone who

indulged his own whims at the expense of causing great trouble for his own family. Their distress could not keep him from spending long hours playing games, or watching anime, or reading manga. That is Kanou Shinichi for you.”

H-He’s really not pulling his punches!

And to add insult to injury—

“Yes! He real-ly is most des-pic-a-ble!” Petralka said in Japanese, a mischievous smile on her face. What, now even she was getting in on the act?! And going out of her way to speak Japanese to do it?!

But her merciless words had a surprising effect.

“Matoba-kun!” one of the voices demanded. “Who was that who spoke just now?!”

“The empress of the Eldant Empire,” Matoba-san said drily.

There was absolute silence from the communication machine. It stretched out until I thought it would go on forever, even though it probably lasted no more than five minutes. Finally, someone on the other side spoke in a weary voice:

“Matoba-kun, for now... consider the operation suspended. We’re delegating full authority to you. Just please have the special operations unit withdraw, if you can.”



Later.

We had the soldiers from the special operations unit taken back to the cave where the hyperspace tunnel was and released there. Without their weapons, naturally. The royal forces who accompanied them reported that the men went quietly back to Japan—maybe they knew when discretion was the better part of valor.

And me? I had opened every window in the mansion, trying to get the last traces of the tear gas out as quickly as possible. I was sitting at home, despondent.

Almost before I knew it, the sky had started to lighten, the sun working its way over the horizon and chasing the night away.

In the moment, sheer adrenaline had almost kept me from thinking about it, but I, a home security guard/average teenager, had just gone toe-to-toe with honest-to-God VIPs of the Japanese government. Now that I had a chance to think about it, the whole concept was so terrifying it left me drained.

“Master.” Myusel sat down beside me and gently put a blanket over my shoulders. “At least you’re back home. I’ll put tea on.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and stood.

At that moment, though, I heard Matoba-san’s voice. “Kanou Shinichi-kun.”

We had undone his bonds. Minori-san was next to him; we had freed her, too.

"I've had a few words with my superiors. For the time being, your disposal has been... put on hold."

"Gee, I'm thrilled."

"I have to attend a meeting to discuss how the government will deal with the Eldant Empire going forward. I'll be returning to Japan for a while."

"Have fun," I said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

It was only after my conversation with the bigwigs that I realized: when they figured out we were essentially negotiating along parallel lines, they had started to get nervous. I mean, hostages are only useful if they're alive, right? If I had really insisted on staying in the Eldant Empire, the government could have killed my family—but in doing so, they would have lost their leverage.

In fact, it would be fair to say the operation had really failed the moment we found out who the special ops unit was. I'm sure they never expected the brain trust of the Eldant Empire to be waiting in the mansion with me.

They made one other miscalculation, too: the Japanese language.

They were so taken with their magical translator rings that they failed to account for the spread of Japanese. They assumed these other-worlders wouldn't know what they were saying, and it caused them to let down their guard. They said things they might not have said otherwise. You can't put a magic ring on a communications device, and they just figured that even if someone from the Eldant Empire happened to be in the room with me, that person would never understand what we were all saying.

But as it happened, Petralka and Myusel were both already capable of handling simple, daily conversation in Japanese. That's partly because they were both smart people, and partly because they had a sort of competition going to see who could learn the language faster. Nothing like a good rivalry to help you study.

So why did Petralka jump in at the end of our conversation, deliberately speaking Japanese? I'm sure she just wanted to let them know that she was listening—and understanding. She was putting them on notice that they had just revealed their true motives to the empress of the Eldant Empire. They had no choice but to give.

"Kanou Shinichi-kun." Matoba-san again. (Obviously.) He looked as relaxed as ever, but his tone held a hint of a warning. "You've chosen a most dangerous path. Do you understand that? You revile the thought of being an invader, but how are you going to draw the line between what's invasion and what isn't? Even if you manage to do so, you'll have to walk that line for the rest of your life."

I didn't answer immediately, but quietly met his gaze.

He was right. I could argue that it was all good as long as everyone had freedom of choice, but the truth is, it's hard to make sure you maintain something as ambiguous as freedom. And even if the Eldant side at this moment, meaning Petralka and the others, gladly accepted and understood what I was doing, there were no guarantees that later generations might not look back and decide it really had been an invasion after all. That was something that I and the people of the Eldant Empire would always have to watch out for.

"Sure, I understand," I said. I nodded, a smile of challenge on my face. I couldn't let him see any sign of weakness right now. "But I'm an otaku. I play my games on Hard Mode or nothing."

Matoba-san blinked, looking confused. At length, he said, "I see. That truly is how you differ from those of us who seek benefit first and foremost."

He smiled with surprising earnestness and gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder. Then he turned and left, accompanied by Minori-san and a waiting detachment of Eldant soldiers.

It seemed like for the first time, I had seen something of how Matoba-san really felt.

I looked up, suddenly noticing how much brighter the sky had become. The pale, warm sunlight shined over the whole (other) world. Myusel stood beside me, and together we looked up at Eldant Castle. I gave a great stretch.

"All right then! Things are gonna be busy from here on out."

"They are?" Myusel asked, tilting her head like a little bird in an adorable gesture.

I smiled and nodded. I pointed in the direction of the rising sun and said, "They sure are. For starters... hmm. Let's hit the marketplace and set up our own slice of Akiba."

Our fight was only just beginning!

...Pfft. Or something like that.

(つづく)

To be continued...

Afterword

Hello! Light novelist Sakaki here.

I've got *Outbreak Company* Volume 2 for you.

Incidentally, this is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, organizations, or events is purely coincidental.

For example, say some of the political goings-on in this book seem soooooort of somehow like something in real life to you. It's just your imagination. I'm definitely not trying to pick any fights here (heh).

Okay. With that out of the way, I can be confident my book won't get banned..... probably.

But anyway.

Outbreak Company is one of those “alternate world” stories. And no alternate-world light novel (swords-and-sorcery tales being the exemplars) is complete without illustrations.

For that matter, that's probably true even of non-alternate-world light novels. I mean, having pictures is kind of part of the definition. (Okay, I know not everyone will agree with me on this.)

It's just... How do I put this? The amount of information that can be communicated instantaneously by a picture, the atmosphere that can be established by *eleven* pictures, just can't be achieved in linear text.

You can offer a detailed description of something, sure. That increases the quantity of information available. But the simple reality is that it doesn't have the instantaneous impact of a picture, that “bam!” quality. A text is ultimately a collection of the symbols we call words, which are used to help create an image in the mind of the reader. It takes time and effort.

But if instead you can show even a single picture of this alternate world, that's going to have a lot of influence on the reader's conceptions.

Not to mention, the market is flooded with light novels these days. When potential readers pick up your book and say, “Oh. Another *isekai* thing,” it's not an exaggeration to say that the pictures may be what sway them to read one more alternate-world fantasy.

In that sense, having an artist who can draw evocative illustrations can be a matter of life and death for a book like this one, and whether or not that artist is good at getting the details, the little things, right can have a huge impact on the impression the book

leaves on readers. It can actually change how deep the world is perceived to be.

I've got Volume 1 next to me as I write this, and I can only say, with the above in mind, how grateful I am to have been able to work with Yuugen-shi* as my illustrator. They make the characters moe, no question, but they don't stop there; they incorporate them into real scenes, atmospheric moments. It's a surprisingly uncommon talent.

Uncommon it may be, but as moe is so situation-dependent, it really is a crucial part of true "moe art."

Actually, from a philosophical perspective, it's pretty close to what Shinichi says about Elvia's art in this book.

I've been awfully lucky in terms of the illustrators I've gotten to work with for my books, and this series is no exception. I'm probably more eager than anyone to see as many of Yuugen-shi's *Outbreak Company* pictures as possible.

On that note, I'll get right on plotting for the third novel. In addition to the obvious main characters, Elvia and Brooke seem pretty popular, so I'd like to come up with something they can get involved in.

I hope you'll pick up Volume 3 when it comes out.

All right, then! See you in the next volume!

Ichiro Sakaki
25 November 2011

*Note: *-shi* (from the kanji meaning "master") is an honorific often attached to the names of artists and craftspeople.

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Outbreak Company: Volume 2
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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